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The
**SOUTHERN
FOOD
ISSUE**

SOUL of
the SOUTH
AUGUST /
SEPTEMBER
2020

RECIPES

SAMPLE A TASTE *of* LOST
SOUTHERN CLASSICS

MEET
THE BARD
of APPALACHIA
P. 96

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Pictured from left to right:
Kevin Ashade (Pangea), Jimmy Park (Nori Handroll Bar), Dean Fearing (Fearing's Restaurant), Reyna Duong (Sandwich Hag), Anastacia Quiñones (José),
Lizbeth Duque (Pangea), and Dean Fearing (Fearing's Restaurant).

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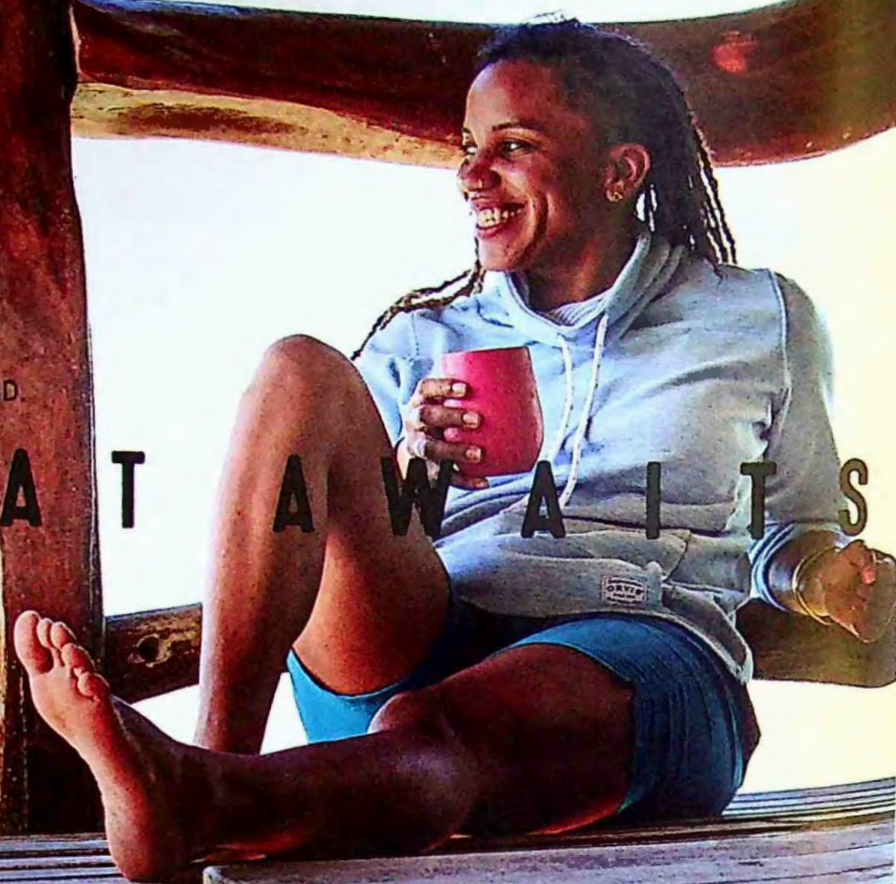
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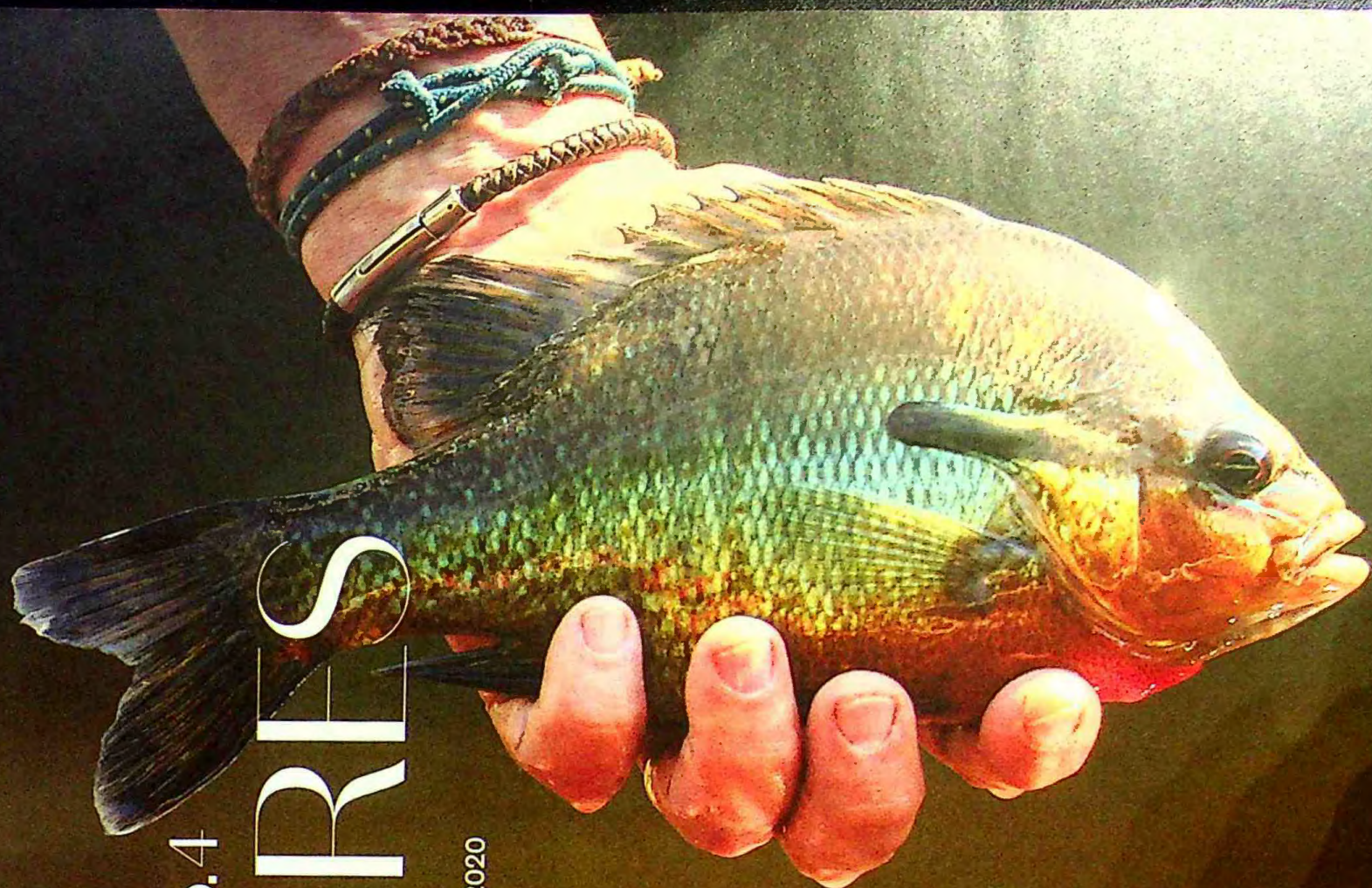
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Southern Recipe Revival

Passed down through generations, these lesser-known dishes are like treasured heirlooms. From a peach julep to spicy-sweet watermelon rind pickles to a showstopping caramel cake, sample a taste of the South's forgotten table

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By T. Edward Nickens

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Throughout Ron Rash's nearly three decades as a poet, novelist, and short story writer, his work has opened a window into Southern Appalachia, illuminating the region's beauty, pain, and truth

By Bronwen Dickey

Redbreast sunfish in hand on the Satilla River in Georgia.

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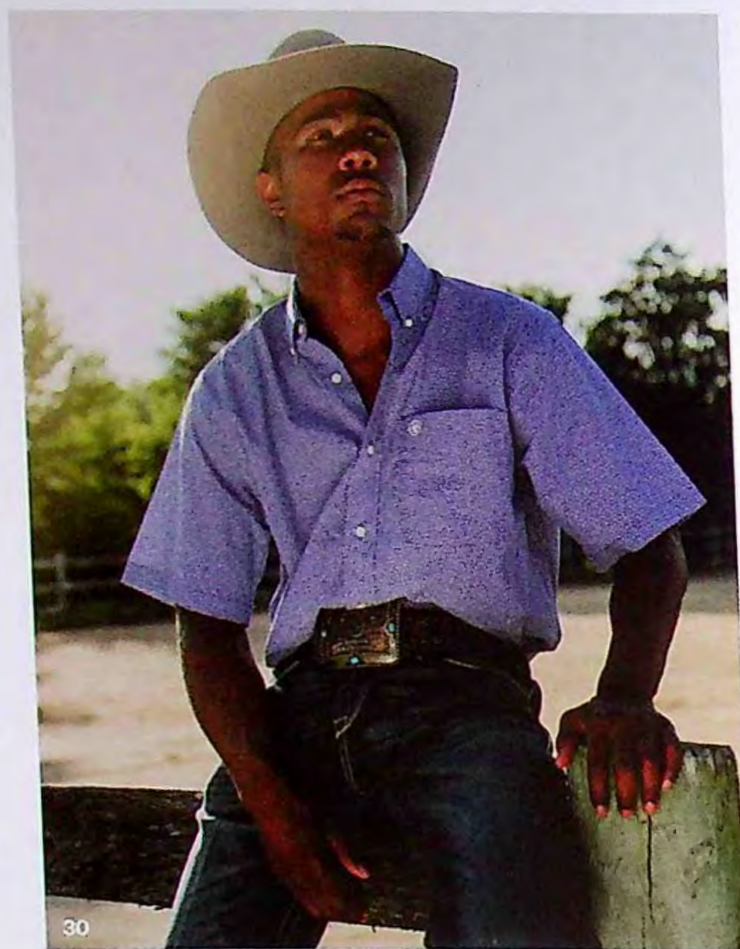
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Red Truck Bakery's caramel
layer cake with pecans (see p. 82).
Photograph by Johnny Autry. Food
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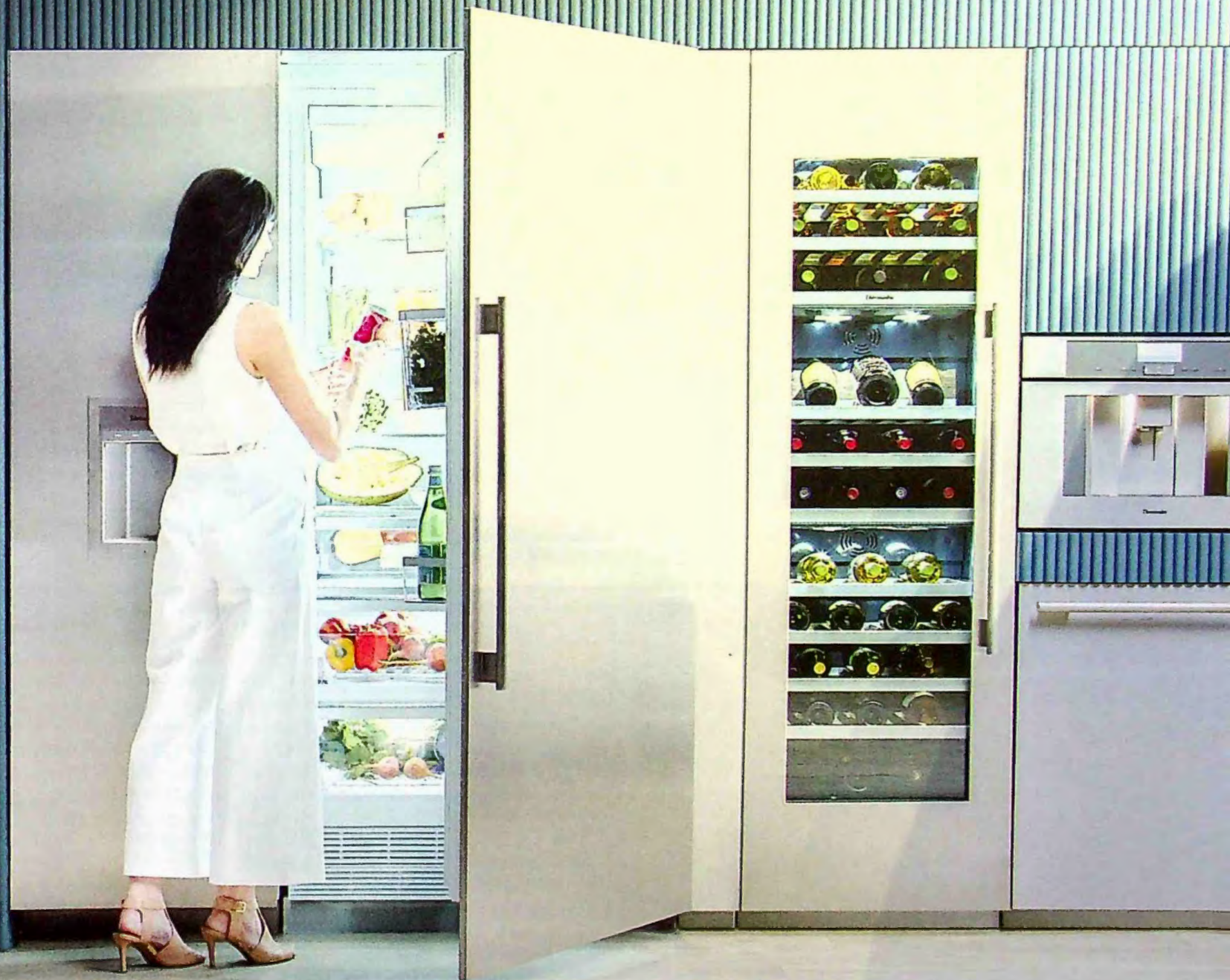
IN EVERY ISSUE

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Bermuda is an island of rare wonders—a place where pink-sand beaches glisten for miles, humpback whales can be spotted midbreach, and hook-to-fork cuisine is a way of life. Here, a blend of vibrant cultures has endured, centered on a reverence for the natural world and an appreciation for island life.

This fall, *Garden & Gun* invites you to experience the beauty firsthand, joining readers from across the country on a truly unforgettable adventure. The weekend getaway promises up-close encounters with the island's singular allure, from expeditions on the water to traditional alfresco meals at day's end, all alongside the editors and personalities of *G&G*. What's more, the Rosewood Bermuda promises a lush, pristine, and spacious home base for each traveler, its elegant, award-winning accommodations peeking out over the calm cerulean waters of Castle Harbour.

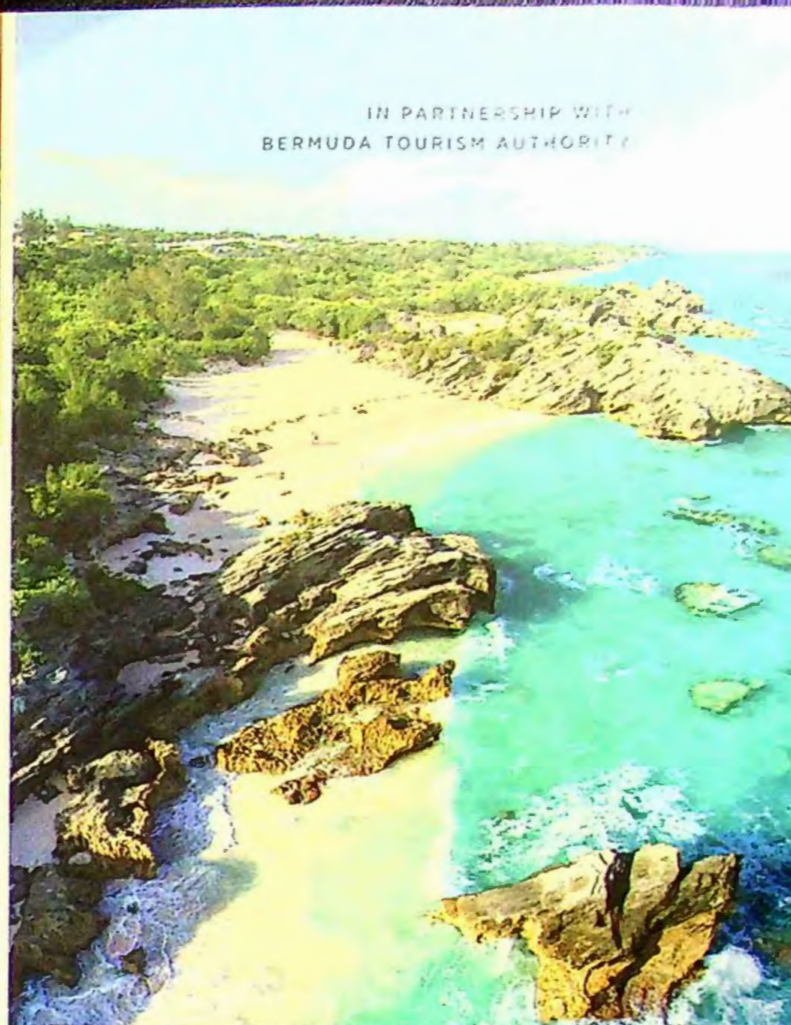
After Friday evening's cocktail welcome, the first full day in Bermuda features a slate of engaging tours, each revealing a different facet of the island. Join local experts and naturalists to explore peaceful wetlands and verdant jungles, sail through winding trails by bike, or catch a glimpse of some of the most pristine coral reefs on the planet. On Saturday evening, the bounty of Bermuda awaits at the host hotel as the table is set with a feast of lion-

fish, spiny lobster, and other fresh, seasonal delicacies caught by local fishermen. With a Dark 'n Stormy® in hand and a cool breeze overhead, lingering on the sprawling ocean-front veranda is encouraged well into the night.

Sunday brings another remarkable excursion—a midmorning boat cruise with partners from the renowned Bermuda Institute of Ocean Sciences (BIOS). After reveling in a champagne brunch on board, turn your attention to the surrounding waters as the experts share fascinating tales of the island and their work in the study of Bermuda's rich ocean life. Following the cruise, the rest of the day is yours; seek out a corner of the island that strikes your fancy, from the tranquil spa or rolling golf links at the Rosewood Bermuda to the stylish boutiques and galleries that dot the capital city of Hamilton.

One thing is certain: Each moment in Bermuda is a brush with magic, and this exclusive weekend promises rich and meaningful experiences you won't soon forget.

To book your spot for this unforgettable adventure, visit gardenandgun.com/Bermuda2020



From the breathtaking grounds of the Rosewood Bermuda to the island's wild spaces, a weekend in Bermuda is equal parts adventure and respite.

From top: A bowl of fresh-picked pokeweed; writer Latria Graham in the field; the Autrys at work in their studio.



Photo Foraging

THE TRUE STORY OF AN EARLY-MORNING POKEWEE HUNT



When it comes to photographing food, few do it as well as Johnny and Charlotte Autry. The pair (he's behind the camera; she prepares and styles the food) has been responsible for some of the most mouthwatering images to run in *Garden & Gun*, from the heroic tomato sandwich that appeared on the cover (August/September 2015) to our award-winning wild game feature (October/November 2019) to the dishes in this issue's "Southern Recipe Revival"



story, including the stunning caramel cake on the cover. But not every shoot is a proverbial cakewalk.

There was one slight problem with photographing the poke salad dish in the feature. The Autrys needed some fresh pokeweed and had no way to source it. That's where the author of the piece, Latria Graham, stepped in. Graham is no stranger to the pages of *G&G* either. Her story on the loss of her family's farm ("A Dream Uprooted," April/May 2020) has generated more reader reaction than any other in recent memory. Her first taste of pokeweed came at the age of eleven, when her father had added the boiled leaves to his eggs with some onions. "I destroyed it," she says. Later, her grandmother taught her where to find the plant. "Pokeweed was that first green vegetable that came up in spring," Graham says. "It was a sign you had survived another cycle, that it was the end of the Hunger Games."

Graham had a patch of pokeweed scouted out, but the day before the shoot, the area was closed off due to COVID-19 restrictions. And that's how she found herself searching a new area in the dark early the next

morning, wearing a headlamp and walking ankle-deep in the mud along the edge of a stream near her home in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Once she had the prize in hand, Graham stashed it in the back seat of her car and drove to the Autrys' studio in Asheville, North Carolina, where torrential rain had caused a leak in the roof. The pokeweed arrived as the Autrys ran about deploying tarps and protecting the electrical panel. Soon it was on the stove as Charlotte whipped up Graham's traditional recipe, the same way her late grandmother prepared it.

Slogging through the mud in the dark wasn't much of a deterrent for Graham; she saw it as an homage to the knowledge her grandmother had handed down to her. "I think she would laugh so hard," Graham says of the adventure. "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams."

That's just one of the many stories that happen behind the scenes as each issue of *G&G* comes together, thanks to not only the editorial team but also the photographers and writers. It takes a village, and I'm honored to work with the finest folks around.

DAVID DiBENEDETTO
Senior Vice President & Editor in Chief

Gripping Read

The latest from North Carolina author David Joy



One upside of the COVID quarantine has been the amount of reading I've been able to do. A favorite book I've finished recently is *When These Mountains Burn* by *G&G* contributor David Joy. The novel is Appalachian noir at its finest. A father's love is tested by the inescapable pull of drugs on his son and the lengths he must go to save him. Joy's storytelling is top-notch (and not for the faint of heart), and you'll find yourself turning pages deep into the night. But it's his knack for capturing a sense of place that really brings the hammer down.



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Jessica B. Harris

WRITER

"My mother was alive when we were re-creating the recipe for watermelon rind pickles," says Jessica B. Harris of the childhood dish she wrote about for "Southern Recipe Revival" (p. 72). "She was the amazing type of person who could taste something and know the ingredients. She was a much better cook than I will ever be." A culinary historian, writer, teacher, and editor, Harris has spent the last four decades between her homes in Brooklyn, Martha's Vineyard, and New Orleans exploring the foodways of the African diaspora. This year, the James Beard Foundation honored Harris with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

"There's a kinship when you meet someone from the South, especially in a city as big as L.A."

—John Meroney, on interviewing the actor Walton Goggins, p. 25



Jonathan Miles

WRITER

For a typical issue, Jonathan Miles has a hard time narrowing down the spread of Southern literary offerings to just one work to review for *Garden & Gun's* Books column (p. 34). This time, the task proved even more challenging. "Because of the COVID-19 crisis, publishers moved the release dates of a number of books from spring to fall, resulting in a bumper crop," Miles says. "Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, cookbooks." So the column expanded, and the list is reminiscent of Miles's own résumé: He's written three novels, a cookbook with game and fish recipes, and articles for such publications as *GQ* and the *New York Times Book Review*.



Ali Harper

PHOTOGRAPHER

Ali Harper captured a Chattanooga conservatory (In the Garden, p. 51) where "it looked like it was raining orchids," she says, and a Cashiers, North Carolina, mountain house (Homeplace, p. 58) where the snowy hydrangeas "were as big as dinner plates" for this issue. Her own garden at home in the Serenbe community, southwest of Atlanta, is also filled with flowers for cutting. "My peonies are my prized possessions," she says. Harper's images of interiors, exteriors, food, and people have appeared in such magazines as *Outside* and *Atlanta Homes & Lifestyles*, and in work for companies including Sid & Ann Mashburn.



Barry Blitt

ILLUSTRATOR

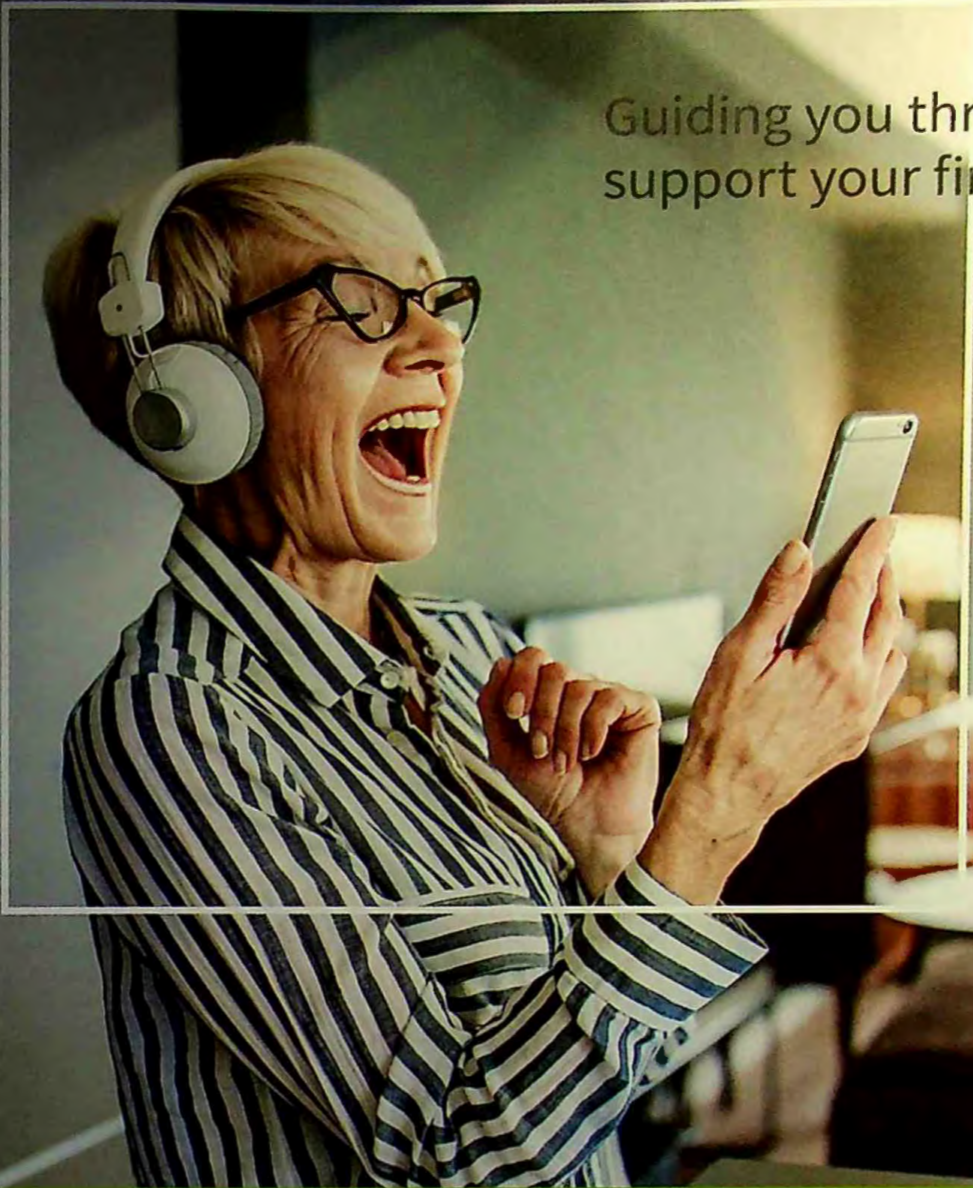
Throughout his long career as an illustrator and cartoonist, Barry Blitt has drawn current and former presidents, senators, foreign leaders, and oodles of historical figures for the likes of the *New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *Atlantic*. Some of that work even won him a Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning this past spring. "But I don't believe I've ever drawn William Faulkner before," Blitt says of his depiction in this issue's End of the Line (p. 118). "Whereas I've drawn Roy Blount Jr.'s caricature for every issue of the magazine for the last twelve years or so, and I can pretty much do it in my sleep by now—though it hasn't come to that yet."



John Meroney

WRITER

"There's a kinship when you meet someone from the South, especially in a city as big as L.A.," says John Meroney of his interview with the Georgia-raised actor Walton Goggins (p. 25). A native of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Meroney has written for the *Atlantic* and *Architectural Digest*, among other publications, and his work on Netflix's *Re-Mastered* earned him an Emmy nomination. In L.A., Meroney has a group of Southern friends who gather for deviled eggs, country ham, and other dishes that remind them of home. "But I miss barbecue," Meroney says. "L.A. tries, but Lexington-style, you just can't replicate."



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"I have been doggedly trying to introduce okra's cultivation in Spain. No success yet, but there's always hope"

SUMMER SOLACE

What a great article about Leo McGee's hydrangeas (In the Garden, June/July 2020). The deer and I down here in Georgia are gazing longingly at the beautiful blooms.

Bob Henkel
Lexington, Georgia

Thanks to David DiBenedetto for letting me see his backyard chickadee eggs (Editor's Letter, June/July 2020). The young in my family have already fledged! Flight training day was nerve-racking for the parents and for their human.

Theresa Clark
Kensington, Maryland

I love okra in all its forms (Anatomy of a Classic, June/July 2020). I have been doggedly trying to introduce its cultivation in Spain. No success yet, but there's always hope.

Jenny Pugh Hernandez
Madrid, Spain

As I shelter in place with my three young kids and husband, I can't thank you enough for the vacation you took me on as I read the June/July 2020 issue. Currently, I am hesitant to book a plane ticket, but I still got to read about new sites and sample fried okra with caviar rémoulade, and I am inspired to concoct a strong Trader Vic's Planter's Punch.

Alix Putnam
Paris, Texas

LONG LIVE THREADGILL'S

Editor's note: In the June/July 2020 issue, Holly George-Warren wrote an ode to Threadgill's, a long-standing restaurant and music venue in Austin, Texas. Sadly, its owner, Eddie Wilson, announced after we went to press that he will be closing Threadgill's for good.

I was so happy to read the piece on Threadgill's (Our Kind of Place, June/July 2020). It brought tears to my eyes. This place and its history will be greatly missed by everyone who patronized it.

Jane Wallace
Dripping Springs, Texas

The few things I remember about Threadgill's are the chicken-fried steak (I'd never heard of it before that), the peanut shells littering the floor, and the Janis Joplin record on the wall. Thanks for bringing back good memories and filling in a lot of info I never knew.

Alex Boyar
Washington, D.C.

GUIDED HOME

I enjoyed "Guiding Presence" (June/July 2020). Many of us know our own Uncle Trip. I see my two grandfathers. I can still remember fishing trips, dinners, or just simply walking along with their hands on my shoulder. Thank you, Russell Worth Parker, for taking me down memory lane.

Mark Sabol
St. Augustine, Florida

Social Chatter

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AND BEYOND



WE ASKED...

What's the most underrated Southern food?

On Facebook and Twitter, readers told us their favorite undervalued bites.

A few slices of fatback, or as Mama called it, streak of lean, fried crispy with cornbread. **Carol Wilson**

Chocolate gravy and cathead biscuits. **Tia Greene**

Ramps. Underrated, delicious, and a stinky staple in Appalachian culture. A sure sign of spring. **Bradi Osborn Newsome**

Stewed okra and tomatoes. **@Rosarian4**

Cracklin' bread. My mother served it warm in a bowl with milk poured over it. **Debby Saunders Kreimer**

Mayonnaise cake. **Geoffrey Jones**

Fried okra is totally underrated. It's better than french fries if done right. **Mandie Harwell**

MoonPies. With or without the RC Cola. **@nekkidmusic**

Purple hull peas and hog maw. **Kevin Smithers**

Kentucky burgoo. **Dawn Anderson**

A really well-made biscuit. It takes the practice of the Karate Kid. **Christine Pietrandrea**



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Byond the bigger cities and sleepy towns that lie to the north, a surprising oasis awaits on Alabama's southern coast. Known as **Gulf Shores and Orange Beach**, the area skirts the Gulf of Mexico's calm, bath-like waters, and its thirty-two miles of white sand beaches are pristine and inviting all year long. With ample room to roam, the destination sprawls out as a safe place to get away when the time is right, the scene's natural beauty at the heart of each moment.

With plenty of sunscreen and an adventurous spirit, visitors should prepare an itinerary that explores the great outdoors. A perfect starting point? The meandering waters of the **Coastal Alabama Back Bay Blueway**. Its twenty-one launch sites lead paddlers through the waterways of Gulf Shores, Orange Beach, and Fort Morgan, each route an enchanting journey via kayak or paddleboard. Back onshore, the **Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail complex** connects the cities of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach with fifteen trails. Winding through six distinct ecosystems, the twenty-eight peaceful miles are perfect for biking, hiking, and birding.

Home to some of the country's most **bountiful waters**, the Gulf Shores and Orange Beach area is a haven for experienced

fishermen and novices alike. From pier and shore fishing to deep-sea excursions, the region teems with skilled guides offering a variety of trips for all anglers. Catch the thrill of chasing sailfish through the turquoise waves or relish a quieter moment on the water; possibilities for angling are as boundless as the restaurants onshore, many of which are eager to prepare your latest catch to your liking. Those partial to golf will find something marvelous here, too; coastal Alabama is home to **fifteen courses**, many of which are located

within some of the region's finest golf clubs and resorts. With a cool breeze drifting in from the Gulf and a clear blue sky overhead, a round or two on the area's exquisitely maintained links is enough to keep avid golfers returning season after season.

For a quintessential beachfront escape (and a little extra space to yourself), book a stay at one of the countless **beach houses or condos** available for rent throughout the area. Amenities such as full kitchens, sunny decks, and private beach access allow guests to truly make themselves at home, avoiding crowds while experiencing the coastal oasis in full. Here, the notion of "getting away from it all" becomes a blissful reality, and whether it's an end-of-summer hurrah or a moment of peace you seek, Gulf Shores and Orange Beach are waiting, ready to welcome you with open arms.

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TALK OF THE SOUTH

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Walton Goggins Drinks It In

THE GEORGIA-RAISED
ACTOR ON GOOD
COCKTAILS, THE ANDY
GRIFFITH SHOW,
AND PLAYING
SOUTHERN RIGHT

By John Meroney

Goggins at Bar Stella on Sunset Boulevard, one of his favorite spots in Los Angeles.

It's a child's game. Turn yourself over to an imaginary set of circumstances. Everything you need to know is in the script. Read it three hundred times. Walton Goggins says those are the simple keys to acting, wisdom he gleaned from studying with the acting coach Harry Mastrogeorge for a decade. Such lessons have paid off. Goggins has appeared in some of TV's best, from the gritty dramas *The Shield* and *Justified* to the indelible HBO comedies *Vice Principals* and *The Righteous Gemstones*, which will return for a second season. On the big screen, he's part of Quentin Tarantino's stable, with memorable roles in *Django Unchained* and *The Hateful Eight*. And last year, Goggins got his own series on CBS, *The Unicorn*, in which he plays a widower in Raleigh raising two daughters while trying to date again. CBS has renewed the show. ¶ Born in Alabama, Goggins grew up in Georgia and moved to Hollywood at nineteen, working at LA Fitness and starting a valet parking business while taking acting classes and auditioning. Now forty-eight, he co-owns Mulholland Distilling with his friend Matthew Alper. ¶ I first met with the actor over whiskey at Bar Stella in Los Angeles. In the midst of the pandemic, we caught up by phone and started by talking about our mutual obsession with *The Andy Griffith Show*.

Like Andy Griffith, The Unicorn takes place in North Carolina, and you even play a widower dad.

That's right. I grew up watching *The Andy Griffith Show* in reruns. It was a seminal thing in my life. And I looked at it again in preparation for *The Unicorn*. In fact, my son started watching it with me.

Has it aged well?

The people who made that show were really putting something wonderful into the world. It's unapologetic in its earnestness and sadness, but it's also uplifting. I saw that and thought, "Why can't we do that in the year 2020 on network television? We can do that."

How did the South impact your career?

I never appreciated my culture and my people until I moved out here away from it. All of a sudden, the things that I wanted to get away from became very important. My accent gave me an opportunity to sustain myself. At first, there were just roles playing dumb hicks. It's no different than an Italian actor from New York who moves to Los Angeles—you're going to play a mafioso. And if you're from the South, you're going to play a redneck. Those parts gave me enough free time to study. Once I started getting some power, I made movies with Ray McKinnon, who's from Georgia. We did stories about our childhoods and what the South meant to us. We started with *The Accountant*, a short released in 2001, and it won an Academy Award.

You took playing a redneck to another dimension as Boyd Crowder on Justified, which was set in Kentucky.

Boyd allowed me to give a platform to people from rural America. I wanted them to see a person who, without an education, was the smartest guy in the room. Those were the people who I knew growing up. So often people from different regions in this country are reduced to a very narrow interpretation. I wanted to blow that out of the water and to make people proud, in a way.

Whiskey became an important part of that show. Is that what inspired you to start Mulholland Distilling?

Well, I'm not going to sell toothpaste, you know? And I'm not really good at selling anything. But I am good at living my life in a certain way, and I think people from the South by and large have to sign a contract when you're born that when you're of age, you have to have a sundowner at night. When my friend Matthew Alper, who was one of the best cameramen in the business, said he wanted to start distilling, I said, I'd like to go on this journey with you.

It seems to come naturally.

I love drinking with people, and I've done it all over the world. Sneaking a beer with some Indians outside of Jaipur during the week of Holi. Having a glass of wine in Namibia when I was doing *Tomb Raider*, hanging out with members of the Himba tribe on the Angolan border. I love imbibing with people, hearing their stories.

What makes a great cocktail?

Simplicity. It's like the best George Jones song—three chords and the truth. For me, it's whatever liquor I choose, a simple syrup, and citrus. I do love a martini as well.

In 1997, you appeared in Robert Duvall's movie The Apostle, about a Pentecostal preacher. What did you learn from him?

Authenticity. To not talk down to your audience. To be truthful with the story that you're trying to tell and the place that you're trying to tell it from. He also taught me to have fun with storytelling. And Bobby loves the South.

You play his assistant, Sam, and when Duvall's character gets arrested, Sam becomes a born-again Christian.

Your performance of that moment is stunning. How much of your conversion was in Duvall's script?

Bobby is a dear friend and a mentor, but I can safely say that none of that was on the page of the script he wrote. When we got back to Los Angeles after shooting, he took me to lunch. "Son," he said, "I don't know if acting is what you want to do for the rest of your life, but it should be because you feel deeply. You can't manufacture that. It's either in you or it isn't. What you did in that scene made my story." That's the biggest compliment I could ever receive from anyone, let alone my hero. I was twenty-four years old, and he changed my life.

Whom did you look up to growing up?

Burt Reynolds. Burt made movies in Atlanta, and I remember when *Sharky's Machine* was being filmed in the Peachtree Plaza downtown. That was extraordinary to me. He was a real folk hero—an icon, man, to people from the South.

On Vice Principals, your character was a conniving high school administrator named Lee Russell, which sounds like a Southern name.

Yeah, "Lee Russell," absolutely. I loved making *Vice Principals*. The creators, Danny McBride and Jody Hill, are from Virginia and North Carolina. The executive producer and director, David Gordon Green, is from Texas. There's this shared kind of sense of humor that is part and parcel of being from where we're from. Nobody makes me laugh the way somebody from the South can make me laugh. ☐



The actor, who discovered Bar Stella while filming The Shield, co-owns L.A.'s Mulholland Distilling.

TALK OF THE SOUTH

MUSIC

Nashville Original

NEVER ONE TO SIT STILL, MARGO PRICE RETURNS WITH AN ALBUM AS BOLD AS SHE IS

By Matt Hendrickson

Like most of us during the pandemic, Margo Price has been doing the best she can. At her home just outside of Nashville that she shares with her husband, the singer-songwriter Jeremy Ivey, and two children, music is always present, whether it's Price blowing off steam by trading her usual guitar to bang on a set of drums, or the family listening to an episode of Bob Dylan's *Theme Time Radio Hour* during dinner. When she needs some fresh air, she heads out for a run, usually pushing her one-year-old daughter, Ramona, in the jogging stroller while her ten-year-old son, Judah, rides along on his bike. They live in the countryside, so they see more chickens, goats, and horses than people or cars. Price used to frequent a gym in East Nashville to work out, but now, hunkered down at home, exercising is a family affair. "I'm not gonna lie, some days are really rough," she admits. "They say it takes a village, but there's no village right now."

Some moments have been particularly brutal. The couple's close friend John Prine passed away in April, and Ivey fought his own suspected battle with COVID-19. (Though he's now recovered, Price says it took weeks for him to feel even close to 100 percent.) She frets about money; like most artists, Price makes the majority of her income on the road. And she was supposed to release her third studio album, *That's How Rumors Get Started*, in May but had second thoughts. "It just felt yucky and like everybody's going through something terrible and losing their jobs," she says. "How do I tell people, 'Buy my album!'"

It was worth the wait. Released this summer, *Rumors* is an instant classic, a strikingly assured effort that owes as much to the dreamy Laurel Canyon vibe as it does to Nashville's twang. Songs like the title track and "Letting Me Down" shimmer with the harmonies of Fleetwood Mac, while "Twinkle Twinkle" is a scuzzy blues stomper, and the monster closer "I'd Die for You" unfolds as a searing love song to her husband, with Price's voice exploding in a howl as defiant as it is swooning.

Price's first two albums, *Midwest Farmer's Daughter* and *All American Made*, established her as one of Nashville's brightest new talents, combining frank, uncompromising songwriting with a vintage country sound and propelling her to a Grammy nomination for Best New Artist in 2019. *Rumors*, however, is a decided-

Price at Dee's lounge in Madison, Tennessee. *That's How Rumors Get Started* is her third studio album.

ly uncountrified record, which was by design. "I get bored pushing the same narrative," she says. "I just wanted to make a classic rock and roll record."

Price found a kindred spirit in her good friend Sturgill Simpson, who produced the album. The lauded Kentucky-born songwriter had been after Price to collaborate, though she kept putting him off. "He wanted to produce my second album, and I told him no because I didn't want it to ruin our friendship," she says. "He's notorious for strong opinions, and honestly so am I. But now, we're good enough friends to give each other shit without getting offended. I like Stu because he is always honest with me and will tell me his opinion while still listening to mine."

Simpson assembled a crew of top-shelf session players including R&B drummer James Gadson, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers keyboardist Benmont Tench, bassist Pino Palladino, and guitarist Matt Sweeney. Price and Ivey cowrote many of the songs on *Rumors*, and the lyrics drip with intimate details. A recurring theme is the struggle of maintaining a marriage when one person is gone for long stretches. "We got in a huge fight," Price says, "and he said to me, 'It's like we both started a company, and you became the CEO and I became the janitor, and it just hurts so bad.' I was like, 'Look, I'm out here breaking my back and busting ass to put food on the table. And I get that it's not glamorous to be home, doing dishes and taking the kid to school, but this is kind of what we have to do right now.'"

If anything, weathering the pandemic has deepened their relationship. "Jeremy and I are stronger than ever," she says. "We've been tested, and how we handle the hard times says a lot about who we are as people." Price has launched a radio show that airs on YouTube, and she just finished producing a record for Jessi Colter, Waylon Jennings's wife. And while she's itching to get back on the road, she's unsure of how that looks. "I have no clue, and that's really what's most terrifying. I hope we can find a way to do it even if it's playing at a drive-in movie. I miss playing more than anything." □



Texas Eclectics

A wild ride from a band of first-rate Lone Star musicians



The Texas Gentlemen FLOOR IT!!!

■ A group of hotshot Dallas session players and sidemen, the Texas Gentlemen have backed up the likes of George Strait and Kris Kristofferson (Joe Ely called them "the best backing band I have ever played with"). With all that talent, nothing is off-limits on *Floor It!!!*, the Gentlemen's outrageous second album. Dr. John funk gives way to Sgt. Pepper's-era Beatles psychedelia and ZZ Top boogie, often within the same number. It's an expertly played collection of songs that will leave you as woozy as pounding Lone Star beers at a late-summer Cowboys tailgate. —M.H.

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TALK OF THE SOUTH



Zeb Mitchell atop his quarter horse, Steel, on a ranch outside Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Opposite: Mitchell rides the bull OK Brand during an Okie and the Brute event in February.

SPORTING SCENE

Bucking Convention

ZEKE MITCHELL'S UNORTHODOX RISE TO THE TOP OF PROFESSIONAL BULL RIDING

By Caroline Sanders

When Ezekiel Mitchell climbs onto a bull in the bucking chute, just before he enters the rodeo arena, he repeats a mantra in his head as he situates himself atop the two-thousand-pound beast: *Finish, finish, finish. Ride, ride, ride. Stay down till you come up. Through the whistle.*

"But once that gate opens, you don't have time to think," says Mitchell, a twenty-three-year-old professional bull rider known as Zeke or Blue to his friends, family, and ever-growing legion of fans (at last count, more than 56,000 followers on Instagram and 172,000 on TikTok). Now in his sophomore season in Unleash the Beast, the premier series of the Professional Bull Riders (PBR), Mitchell has his eye on the world title in November—a rise to stardom rife with unconventional turns.

Mitchell grew up splitting time between his father's home in Rockdale, Texas, and his mother's in Baytown, just outside of Houston. Cowboys could be scarce—especially African American cowboys—but Mitchell had a strong desire to ride even as a child. Westerns like *Tombstone*, library books, and his father's job as an equine dentist fanned his early aspirations. "The first few times I got on a steer when I was fifteen, I didn't know there were any fundamentals," he says. "I just knew I could get on there and ride. Then I got on YouTube and started figuring things out."

Yes, Mitchell relied on watching videos to learn technique, but his dad, Danny, initially kept him from competing on bulls, thinking another event like roping or bronc riding might satisfy the longing. But Zeke persisted with the sport, and when he grew too old to contend on steers—considered a gentler gateway to bull riding—Danny finally consented. His mother, Jamie, heeding the age-old advice from Waylon and Willie about babies and cowboys, was harder to convince. "But who can blame a mom?" Mitchell says with a shrug. "Now that I know what I'm doing, and I've become more and more successful, she's one of my biggest fans."

Mitchell began living part-time in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, last year to escape distractions and focus on riding. And according to Jerome Davis, a founder of the PBR and the 1995 world champion, it's working. "Even in the last six to eight months, Zeke's riding has stepped up another notch," says Davis, who often hosts Mitchell to practice on the bulls at his ranch in nearby Archdale. "His future is bright, and he believes it. He can get to the top ten if he can keep that mindset."

In late spring, Mitchell sat at number twenty-three in the world rankings—one of the few black men competing at the highest level of the sport. "It doesn't matter your race or personality," he says. "I'm proof that you don't have to do what your social group wants you to do. I don't fit the mold, but you don't have to fit the mold." His demeanor also stands out in the sport: "Everybody likes him," Davis says. "In bull riding, you're facing an opponent you can't read or intimidate," Mitchell explains. "Your name doesn't scare them, so you have to find something deeper within yourself to overcome an animal that outweighs you ten times and can move on a dime." For him, it's his faith: "It's why I'm so happy all the time."

He also doesn't give in to fear. "It's my job," he says, "and you can die or get injured in any job: pushing paper, being a mailman, anything." Even so, it's no great leap to assume riding has more of an up-front risk. On two occasions, Mitchell nearly lost an ear: once, when a dewclaw to the side of the head turned his lobe inside out, and another time, when he went headfirst over a bull's horn. "He barely caught the corner of my ear, but it was enough to knock me unconscious and split my ear pretty much in half." He came to in the sports medicine room beneath the arena, his friends passing by to tease him for "taking a nap" in the middle of the ride. "I was just trying not to laugh."

Even with that easygoing attitude, Mitchell's goal, of course, has always been to win. "Being second best—or fifteenth best, which I was last year—doesn't settle well with me," he says. Still, it's the thrill of being on the bull that propels him. "It's like driving a truck off a cliff and then trying to steer it down. I love taking that complete and utter chaos and being able to control it for once. For those eight seconds at a time." **G**



Alabama's Culinary Heritage

A TOUR OF THE STATE'S ICONIC DISHES REVEALS A RICH HISTORY IN EVERY BITE

Throughout Southern cuisine, strong ties to history are as abundant as biscuits or cast iron. Be it a sworn-by family recipe or a neighborhood gathering place, the region's epicurean roots run deep. Alabama's western half is no exception; here, time-honored dishes star on every menu, and a myriad of historic spots still welcome natives and travelers alike. For a taste of the culinary scene, we look to five quintessential dishes (and treats) that made the Alabama Tourism Department's coveted list "100 Dishes to Eat in Alabama," each unlocking its own piece of the state's rich heritage.

In Tuscaloosa, **Baumhower's Victory Grille** is an undeniable favorite. The first of many locations throughout the state, the college-town wing spot was opened in 1981 by Bob Baumhower, the University of Alabama All-American football star and six-time All-Pro for the Miami Dolphins. Sharing his love for food with the city where he got his start, Baumhower centered his menu on buffalo-style chicken wings and sandwiches like the famous **Hot Bama Brown**. On a crispy slice of Texas toast, the hearty dish is layered with tender roast turkey and smoked bacon, smothered with mushroom gravy and house-made blanco, and topped with fresh tomatoes and Parmesan.



Family owned and operated, **Wayne's Catfish**

Haven has been slinging a fresh local catch to the Russellville community for more than three decades. Living up to its name, the restaurant is known for its unparalleled catfish, battered in a secret family recipe and fried to perfection. The Southern delicacy serves as the centerpiece of one of the eatery's most popular orders, the **whole fish plate**. Accompanied by classic sides like hush puppies and slaw, the iconic dish is known to draw a crowd.

Come summer, Alabamians know a thing or two about heat. That's where **Trowbridge's Ice Cream & Sandwich Shop** comes in. Owned by a third generation of the founding family, the Florence soda fountain celebrated a hundred years in 2018, still boasting retro checkered floors and hand-painted signage. While every shake, malt, and sundae on the menu is enticing, one flavor reigns supreme. Concocted by original owner Paul Trowbridge, the shop's **orange pineapple ice cream** is sweet and tangy, and the perfect cooldown on a sweltering day.

One of America's oldest and most beloved barbecue joints, **Big Bob Gibson Bar-B-Q** of Decatur has been an Alabama favorite for more than ninety years, earning plenty of accolades along the way. A true Southern classic, the restaurant's **Bar-B-Q chicken platter** includes a quarter, half, or whole chicken basted with its famous white sauce and slow smoked until it's fall-apart tender, along with two traditional sides and a soft roll to sop up what's left.

Nestled amid a small grove of trees in the city of Selma, **Tally-Ho Restaurant** offers a unique fine-dining experience. With thirty years of culinary artistry under his belt, chef-owner Bob Kelley serves traditional Southern dishes with European flair. One such favorite is the house **rib eye**, topped with decadent sautéed crabmeat and garlic butter. After dinner, diners can visit the nearby Edmund Pettus Bridge, a significant site during the civil rights movement. In Alabama, after all, links to history are abundant, both on the plate and beyond.

Find more must-try destinations at Alabama.Travel/100Dishes



From top right: Trowbridge's famous orange pineapple ice cream; Big Bob Gibson Bar-B-Q, a Decatur institution for nearly a century.

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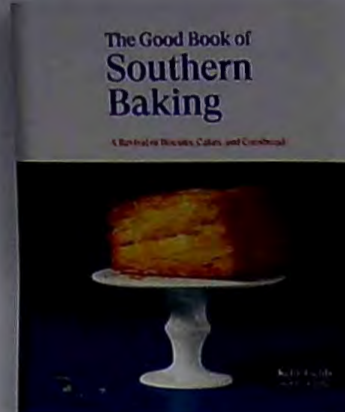
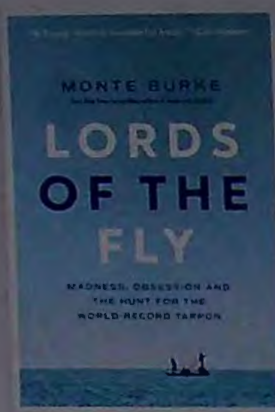
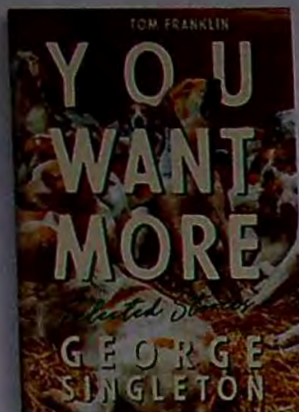
the delicious locally
sourced produce

Smell

the wood-fire oven
roasted seafood

Taste

the freshness of fish
straight from the Gulf



BOOKS

Reader's Choice

NO MATTER WHERE YOU'RE SPENDING YOUR LEISURE TIME THESE DAYS, THERE'S A NEW BOOK TO DELIGHT

By Jonathan Miles

The Front Porch

If the Southern short story has a birthplace, it's surely the front porch. Not any specific porch, mind you, but the great multitude of porches fronting mountain cabins, riverside mansions, and country stores alike, all of them fostering, over time, the ideal conditions for storytelling: comfort, unhurriedness, idleness, breezes worth shooting. "Where else in our huge national store of fictional life," Reynolds Price once asked in an essay, "can we find a comparable crystallization of human feeling in a single feature of house-and-home?"

So where else, then, to settle in with the season's best new collections of short fiction?

Rangy, wise, and unpredictable, *If I Had Two Wings* is Randall Kenan's first collection since 1992's groundbreaking *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*. Surprises lurk in almost every story. Howard Hughes shows up at a family's front door; a ghost emerges during the renovation of an antebellum house. In "Now Why Come That Is?," a rusty razorback hog ("a stalking ham") haunts a man named Percy Terrell, appearing without warning in Percy's bedroom, workplace, or the cab of his truck—and visible to no one else, at least for a time. "Every day now, the hog was sure to show," Kenan writes, with a

grin, "and everywhere that Percy went the hog was sure to go." (One of Kenan's stories ends with the line "...this would be a great day for pork chops." But it's not this story. Kenan, as we said, doesn't do predictable.)

George Singleton's *You Want More: Selected Stories* is a greatest-hits album from a writer whose stories are like epic spitballs from the back of the class: high-arching and unbearably funny protests against the absurdities of contemporary life. Singleton is an heir to Padgett Powell and Lewis Nordan, but his strain of madness—a character snorts habanero powder in a story about caulk—is due its own page in the diagnostic manual.

The Fish Camp

"Fishing—the sport, the pastime, whatever you want to call it—is, in the end, about stories," Monte Burke writes. The stories in his *Lords of the Fly* are about tarpon, and they're great ones: flashy, brawny, and electrifying, just like the tarpon itself. Subtitled *Madness, Obsession and the Hunt for the World-Record Tarpon*, Burke's book centers on Homosassa, Florida, in the late seventies and early eighties, when "the best fly anglers and guides in the world at the time all gathered together in the same spot at the same time with the same goal: to break the world record...for the most glamorous and sought-after fly rod species, the tarpon." The angling stories are epic—imagine poling into a daisy chain of two thousand fish—but Burke (a *Garden & Gun* contributing editor) keeps equal focus on the human element: the rivalries, foibles, and in some cases the Ahab-esque pathologies of the anglers themselves.

The Kitchen

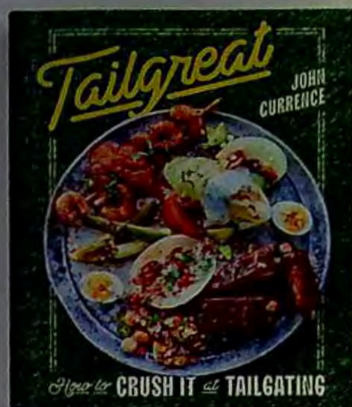
Kelly Fields, the flour-dusted, James Beard Award-ed genius behind Willa Jean restaurant and bakery in New

■ *If I Had Two Wings*, W. W. Norton, \$26

■ *You Want More: Selected Stories*, Hub City Press, \$27

■ *Lords of the Fly*, Pegasus Books, \$27

■ *The Good Book of Southern Baking*, Lorena Jones Books, \$35



Orleans, spent two and a half years working out the recipe for her salted chocolate chip cookies, which, in just five years, have already attained icon status among that city's fabled foodstuffs. The secret, as Fields reveals in *The Good Book of Southern Baking*, is two kinds of flour and three(!) kinds of chocolate. Here too is the secret to Fields's renowned biscuits (Italian-style 00 flour), along with her polished takes on lemon Doberge cake, Sweet Potato and Toasted Honey Marshmallow Pie, and Cornbread Madeleines. "I wrote this book," she writes, "to bury y'all in cornbread and biscuits." Consider us buried. See us smile.

The New Orleans native and Mississippi chef John Currence wants to bury us, too—in the rowdy bliss of tailgating. Currence (also a *G&G* contributing editor) lives in Oxford, Mississippi, where Ole Miss Rebels fans take their pregaming to lavish extremes, so *Tailgreat* arrives with ample (and hangover-dented) cred. It's a master class on game-day revelry, with more than 120 recipes, but stadiums—or even sports—aren't required. Day-Old Croissant and Sausage "Bread Pudding," Spicy Fried Chicken Buttered Popcorn, and Duck and Tasso Red Bean Cassoulet are events in themselves.

The Bedroom

There are only two stories, goes an old saying, in all of literature: someone takes a journey, and a stranger comes to town. Catherine Lacey's novel *Pew* takes the latter lane—but with bracing, exhilarating originality. The stranger, called Pew, is discovered sleeping in a church pew (hence the name) in a small Southern town. The stranger's gender isn't clear, which is one point of civic consternation. But neither is his or her ethnicity, or age (maybe a teen, maybe older), or, because the stranger refuses to speak, his or her background. Almost immediately, the townsfolk try to fill the void by

projecting their fears, desires, bigotries, resentments, and beliefs onto Pew. Yet Lacey's novel, her third, isn't merely a parable about identity. The dark, strange vibrations we feel from the townsfolk eventually grow to a shattering quake.

"Stranger comes to town" is as good a synopsis as any for the work of the British-born travel writer Richard Grant, whose books have seen him dropping into East Africa, northern Mexico, and, more recently, the Mississippi Delta (*Dispatches from Pluto*). In *The Deepest South of All*, Grant plops himself in the town of Natchez, Mississippi, during its annual Tableaux. He chronicles the antebellum-themed pageant's organizers' struggles to keep it relevant—and their deeper conflicts about what it represents—with empathy, skepticism, and exquisitely dry wit. One local's quip to Grant sums it up perfectly: "This whole town is like a Southern *Twin Peaks*."

The Garden

"Oh, I love telling a story," the prolific novelist and essayist Barbara Kingsolver (*The Poisonwood Bible*) wrote last year. "But there's delight in telling a moment." Telling a moment is Kingsolver's apt description of what poetry does, and it's what she does, stunningly, in *How to Fly (In Ten Thousand Easy Lessons)*, her first book of poems since 1992. The first section consists of "how-to" poems—sometimes sly, often moving riffs on how to be married (or divorced), shear sheep, have children, and survive catastrophe. When she trains her eye on nature, though, her language grows ever more vivid: a ghost pipe flower like a "Translucent jewel of ice gleaming from the toes of a forest," winter marked by the "long evening downslant," the act of hand weeding like "tearing out the hair of the world." *How to Fly* is language and observation at their most succulent, moments seized at their peak of ripeness. **G**

■ *Tailgreat*, Ten Speed Press, \$28

■ *Pew*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$26

■ *The Deepest South of All*, Simon & Schuster, \$26

■ *How to Fly (In Ten Thousand Easy Lessons)*, Harper, \$25



ASK G&G

Field Medicine

DOVE SHOTS, BETTER BISCUITS, AND PANDEMIC PROTOCOL

By Guy Martin

Q
A

Friends are staging their annual dove shoot on their farm. Wise idea, all things considered?

A dove shoot won't whisk away the difficulties the pandemic has brought, but it presents a near perfect restorative. The hunt's splayed-out architecture, driven by the mad fighter-jet flight patterns of *Zenaida macroura carolinensis* when rocketing in to feed in a promising field, is tailored a priori to SARS-CoV-2 social distancing. But a dove shoot brings more than just a clinical benefit to this moment in history, namely, the chance to reforge the bonds of a hunting cohort, pushing us out into the world again, into the real dirt of a shooting day, as well as allowing us the sweet boon of the veranda's après-hunt drinks. At which you'll not be plunging your hands into the ice bucket as you top off that refill, correct? Mainly, though, the prey brings us its own noble, columbine lessons: its blinding fifty-five-mile-an-hour bursts, its majestic peregrinations up and down its two-thousand-mile-long flyways, its powerful adaptability to desert, tropical, and piedmont habitat. There are some 249 million of them for a reason. The dove embody a narrative of immense natural resilience, a quality we could all use about now.

Exhausted by the debate. Give us the world's best biscuit recipe.

How many Southerners bake? Three million? Five million? That's how many biscuit receipts there are down home. The biscuit wars cannot be negotiated to a lasting peace, because it keeps everybody sharp if the wars of taste burn bright. The need for biscuits is ancient. The Roman army required a go-to, durable bread for its many campaigns, so the Caesarean cooks developed *bis coctus*, or *bis coquitur*, "twice-baked" bread, built to travel rough. It's the distant ancestor of Italian biscotti and the eighteenth-century British navy's hardtack, which, in turn, is a kissing cousin to our biscuits—light, toss 'em in a saddlebag, they keep for days. The Southern biscuit has been demilitarized and domesticated with leavening, but the genealogy's message is that the South retains its frontier staples. As for the recipe, I'll not declare a Greatest of All Time, because there isn't one. There is a "best" guiding philosophy: small, not large; tart, not sweet. Baking soda, with buttermilk. Why? The sodium bicarbonate, a base, reacts with the buttermilk, an acid. Anybody tells you to make a big biscuit, or to put a grain of sugar in there, I'm sorry: They're scalawags and pretenders of the worst sort. Southern biscuits are still a frontier product stripped of pretense. This gives them the brawny range to carry country ham, or a dollop of molasses, or best, as if you're eating them out of your saddlebags, nothing at all.

Has the pandemic erased all our civility?

In a world in which the French no longer kiss in salutation, it's disorienting to have to dial back the filigreed forms of interaction. Hope is worth embracing, though: In the largest sense, humane, ethical behavior—not to mention etiquette—has forever been challenged by global events, whether by war, famine, pestilence, political jousting, or, more likely, all of the above. We're judged by how we behave within the widening gyre, as Yeats put it. In the long view, we'll not lose our gyroscope of fair play—we may hotly debate it, as we are doing now, and the circumstances of that may tear at the fabric of things, but it's too basic to let go. Bottom line, whether we're fighting a pandemic or engaging in a wrenching national debate of the founding fathers' core notion of civil rights, it's our duty to maintain civil discourse. One fine how-to has been with us awhile. The famed Egyptian vizier Ptahhotep set down his "Maxims" sometime after 2400 BC, at the end of a life in service. He counseled his son and successor to care for the classic virtues—patience, charity toward those less fortunate, the ability to listen—so that good things would come. He stressed how much work that took, which, gauging by our country's last few months, remains our challenge. Ptahhotep's papyrus is in Paris's Bibliothèque nationale de France, worth a visit as soon as the French are able to kiss one another on the cheeks again. □

PROMOTION



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SOUTHERN FOCUS



Nashville, Tennessee

Photograph by Theron Humphrey
1974 BMW R90, 2015

Don't try this at home: After prepping for this shot, the photographer Theron Humphrey hopped onto his vintage motorcycle, his trusty coonhound, Maddie, in the sidecar. At the moment Humphrey (an experienced rider) executed a maneuver called "flying the chair," his assistant waved a treat to get Maddie (also an experienced rider) to look back as the camera clicked. "She's well trained," the North Carolina native says of his dog, "and we spend a ton of time together on the road. This image is all about the circumstances created *outside* the frame." You may recognize Maddie: More than a million people follow her adventures with Humphrey on Instagram (@thiswildidea). She has joined him on countless trips—including during his yearlong *This Wild Idea* series, for which he visited all fifty states to capture everyday people—and has served as the muse for two books of his photography. 📷

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Dirty South

THE POTLIKKER
MARTINI MAKES THE MOST
OF A HUMBLE LEFTOVER

By Wayne Curtis



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHNNY AUTRY

GARDEN&GUN AUG. / SEPT. 2020 41




Ashleigh Shanti, the chef de cuisine at Benne on Eagle in Asheville, needed to make some room in the restaurant's walk-in refrigerator. So she handed a quart of potlikker—the liquid left over after her team stewed down collard greens—to bar manager Tye Harrison. “Do something with it,” she requested.

Harrison started playing around that night. He tried it with whiskey, but that did not spark joy. He experimented with a few other variations. Then a customer came in and ordered a martini “porn star”-style—she wanted it “extra, extra, extra dirty,” Harrison recalls, with lots of brine from the olive jar. A light bulb went off. Harrison stepped into the kitchen and told Shanti he needed some smoked turkey neck. *Right now.* “It was in the middle of service,” she says, “but he had this determination in his eyes.” He got his turkey neck.

The dirty martini has been around since 1901, when a bartender in New York took to making martinis with a muddled olive, then later someone added a splash of brine from the jar. (Strict constructionists will know this version is more closely related to a Gibson, not a martini, but that bait comes attached to a trap that's best not reached for.) Franklin Delano Roosevelt later

popularized the cocktail—the president never met a martini variation he didn't like.

That night, Harrison substituted Shanti's potlikker, which he had mixed with honey and hot sauce to mimic the blend the restaurant uses for braising chicken wings, for the standard olive juice. Then came the garnish: an olive stuffed with a bit of the smoked turkey neck purloined from the kitchen. The result was a savory, salty martini. If you're making it at home, you can use either vodka or gin, Harrison says, but the botanicals in gin dance best with the complex flavors of the spiced-up potlikker (though you're of course also welcome to use the potlikker from your own greens recipe).

When the newly christened Potlikker Martini appeared on Benne's menu earlier this year, customers laughed at first. Then they ordered it and stopped laughing—Harrison says that those who like it *really* like it. “If you're a martini fan, it's definitely something you should try,” he says. The lessons here are twofold: Sometimes, the best things come from what some might consider waste. And, no matter how busy you are, if someone approaches you and demands smoked turkey neck, you should probably just give it to him. 

Potlikker Martini

Yield: 1 cocktail

INGREDIENTS

*2½ oz. gin
(or vodka)
1 oz. potlikker
braising sauce
(recipe follows)
Olives and smoked
turkey, for garnish*

PREPARATION

Stir first 2 ingredients with ice until chilled. Strain into a martini glass. Garnish with olives stuffed with smoked turkey from the potlikker.

For the potlikker braising sauce:

INGREDIENTS

*1 lb. greens such
as collards
1 large yellow
onion, split
1 quart poultry
or vegetable stock
½ cup apple
cider vinegar
¼ cup brown sugar
2 tsp. black pepper
1 tsp. red
pepper flakes
1 smoked
turkey neck
2 tsp. kosher salt
3 tsp. honey
1½ tsp. hot sauce*

PREPARATION

In a stockpot, combine all but last 2 ingredients, ensuring 1 inch of liquid covers the greens (add water if needed). Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to simmer for 1 hour. Drain off and reserve potlikker, and let cool. Making enough braising sauce for 2 drinks makes it easier to divide: Strain 2 oz. of potlikker through a fine-mesh sieve, then mix with honey and hot sauce. Bigger sauce batches will keep in the fridge for a few days.



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ANATOMY OF A CLASSIC

Better Halves

CHEF ASHA GOMEZ GIVES BUTTERNUT SQUASH A FLAVORFUL UPGRADE

By Kim Severson



MEET THE CHEF: ASHA GOMEZ

Hometown:
Thiruvananthapuram,
Kerala, India

The drink she craves:
Gomez developed
an allergy to
caffeine, but it's not
coffee she misses.
"There's nothing like
a cold Coke."

Old-lady plan:
"I'm gonna go
open up a shack
and sell tea, florals,
and jams."

**The kitchen
item she hopes to
hand down
to her son, Ethan:**
A spice tin, which
got passed from
her grandmother
to her mother
and then to her.

In the early days of pandemic cooking, when many of us were trying to shake up our routine, a small twist in technique or the addition of an unexpected ingredient could make a depressingly familiar dish seem exciting. Applied to butternut squash, a few tweaks conjured up by the Atlanta chef Asha Gomez take an often ho-hum staple to places it never dreamed it could go.

Her version starts with scoring the surface of small squashes that have been halved and seeded. The hash marks should be deep enough so a mixture of honey and butter soaks into the flesh as it roasts on a sheet pan—a cooking method Gomez was using long before sheet-pan suppers rose to Instagram fame.

While the squashes roast, make a tomato gravy. Romas from the store will do fine, but late summer and early fall are the perfect time to use up any fleshy tomatoes still lingering in the garden.

Then comes the next twist: grated ginger. A generous amount turned golden in a slick of olive oil gets blended with the pureed tomatoes and a hit of brown sugar. The gravy is delicious poured over the squash as is, but I like to take a stick blender to it, which adds a lightness to the texture. Either way, a final sprinkling of fresh oregano is essential.

The dish has a kiss of India, where Gomez spent her childhood, but she wouldn't call it an Indian recipe. "So many of us get boxed into this idea that we have to cook the food of our ancestral home," she says. "One or two nights a week my kitchen will smell of curry, but every other night it smells of whatever inspires me. It could be from a trip to the market or the memory of travel or a friend who is coming over to eat with me."

That philosophy is at the heart of Gomez's new book, *I Cook in Color: Bright Flavors from My Kitchen and around the World*, out in October. It's a follow-up to her first cookbook, *My Two Souths*, in which she explored a Venn diagram where food from her adopted home in the American South overlaps with the dishes she grew up eating in the southern Indian state of Kerala.

The new book is about cooking from a global pantry, which reflects her travels and friendships. She has recipes for za'atar-crusted lamb with apricots, smothered beef liver ("I just love liver," she says), and a cherry pie with a double crust. And, of course, she includes her squash recipe. It's one of her teenage son Ethan's favorites. "The way I introduce my son to the world is through food," she says. "It seems especially important now when we aren't really able to go anywhere." □



Roasted Butternut Squash with Tomato-Ginger Gravy

Yield: 4 servings

INGREDIENTS

4 small butternut squashes
4 tbsp. unsalted butter, divided
4 tbsp. honey
2 tsp. coarsely ground black pepper
1½ tsp. pink Himalayan salt, divided
2 tbsp. olive oil
2 tbsp. fresh ginger, peeled and finely grated
6 fresh plum tomatoes, pureed
2 tsp. light brown sugar
1 tbsp. fresh oregano leaves, finely chopped

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 400°F. Line a sheet pan with parchment paper. Cut squashes in half lengthwise from the stem down (leave stem and skin on). Use a small spoon to scoop out seeds. Using a paring knife, score the flesh side of the squashes horizontally and

vertically. Place the squash halves on the sheet pan, skin side down. Rub each half with 1½ tsp. butter. Drizzle honey evenly all over the squashes and season them with black pepper and 1 tsp. salt. Place the pan in the oven and roast for 20 to 25 minutes or until squash is fork-tender.

In the meantime, make the tomato gravy. Combine olive oil and ginger in a small pan over medium heat. Cook the ginger for 2 to 3 minutes until golden brown. Add fresh tomato puree to the ginger. Stir in brown sugar and the remaining ½ tsp. salt. Let the tomatoes cook down and reduce by half; this should take about 15 minutes. Serve gravy alongside the roasted butternut squash. Garnish with fresh oregano.






WHAT'S IN SEASON

Brine Dining

FOR AN IDEAL COMPANION TO SUMMER SEAFOOD, TRY A
SALTY BITE OF THIS SEASIDE SUCCULENT

By Jenny Everett

Jeremiah Langhorne was foraging near the beaches in Charleston, South Carolina, when he discovered his first patch of sea beans, an edible succulent that grows wild in the coastal salt marsh throughout the South and beyond. "The pride of bringing back a bag of something that delicious is wonderful," says Langhorne, now the co-owner and chef at the Dabney in Washington, D.C. "When I found out how versatile sea beans are and the possibilities they present, I was hooked." The seaside herb reaches peak flavor in the summer and goes by a myriad of monikers including *Salicornia*, sea asparagus, pickleweed, samphire, and glasswort (because ash from the plant was used to make glass in the sixteenth century). "Some people compare the stalks to asparagus tips or green beans, and the texture is similar, but the salinity and intensity are unmatched," Langhorne says. "The explosiveness of flavor sets them apart."

To find a bunch yourself, search the edges of tidal areas, and once you've properly identified the plant, break off a piece and try it. If it's woody or tough, often the case if the plants have a reddish tint, move to a different patch. "They should be vibrant and full of life, plump, and brightly colored," the chef says. If foraging isn't your thing, sea beans are increasingly found at coastal farmers' markets (you can also order from Heron Farms, an indoor saltwater farm in Charleston, at heronfarms.com). At home, they'll keep for up to five days in the refrigerator in a plastic bag with a moist towel around the stems. Their saltiness pairs especially well with seafood, but sea beans can also be simply blanched for salads, sautéed into stir-fries, or chopped and folded into potato salad. Langhorne likes to work them into a chimichurri or salsa verde (see recipe) for the perfect summer topper to just about any seafood or meat. "There's nothing else like them," he says. "It's like biting an ocean breeze." 

THE CHEF
RECOMMENDS:

Sea Bean Salsa Verde

Yield: 8–10
servings**INGREDIENTS**

2 medium
shallots, minced
6 cloves garlic,
minced
1 cup sea beans,
minced
1 bunch cilantro,
finely chopped
1 bunch parsley,
finely chopped
4 sprigs tarragon,
finely chopped
1 cup extra-virgin
olive oil
1 tsp. dried
Aleppo pepper
1 lemon, zested
3 tbsp. chardonnay
vinegar
1 tbsp. sorghum
or honey
Salt

PREPARATION

Add shallots, garlic, and sea beans to a medium-sized mixing bowl. Stir in herbs. Pour olive oil over the mixture, then stir to combine. Add remaining ingredients (except salt) and whisk together. Let rest for a few hours to allow flavors to come together. Season with salt to taste.

TIP: Langhorne particularly likes to spoon the salsa verde over seared scallops. "Scallops are so sweet they naturally call out for something with some saltiness and brightness—it's a no-brainer to me."

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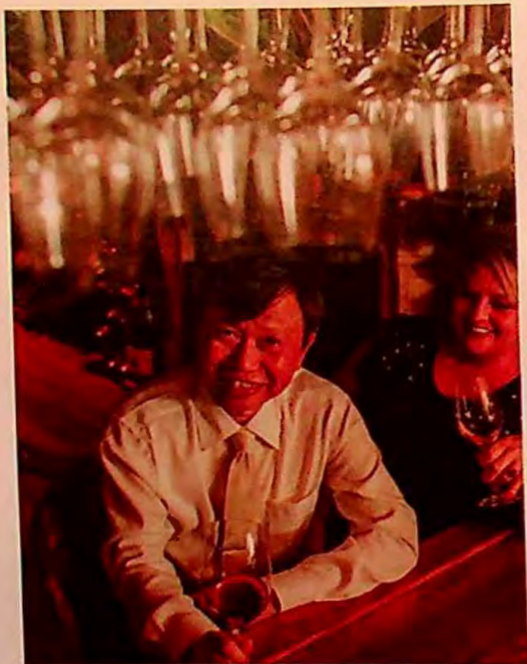
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BY JOHN T. EDGE

The Joy of Restaurants

THOUGHTS ON THE PLEASURES OF AN INSTITUTION THAT HAS WEATHERED TWO CENTURIES—AND THE PEOPLE WHO QUIETLY MAKE GREAT RESTAURANTS SING



I miss the world of going out to eat," texted my friend Bill Joyce, for whom I have great affection born of big nights at small tables. "I miss the warm anticipation of food I've never tasted... I miss sitting across from people I enjoy with the same anticipation."

As Americans return to restaurants, we navigate a fog of emotions. Bearing expectations for lunches to come, stoking memories of dinners past, we arrive hungry and anxious. I'm hungry for chef Vishwesh Bhatt's okra chaat, a toss of fried pods and roasted peanuts, mixed with cilantro and tomato, served at the high-top counter at Snackbar, our local here in Oxford, Mississippi. I'm hungry for pitmaster Helen Turner's pork shoulder sandwiches, smelling of hickory and history and leaking hot sauce, passed through the tiny order window at Helen's Bar-B-Q in Brownsville, Tennessee. And I'm anxious about, well, everything.

If there's an Easter egg hidden in the gloom, it's a gift of perspective. You may read this column to help you determine where to eat next. But in the midst of this long pause, no matter my hungers, I recognize

that I write it to catalogue the contentment I feel while tucked into a comfortable booth, to document the kindness I read on the faces of waiters, and to mark the realization that, in the right moment at the right restaurant, I want for nothing and want to be nowhere else.

I go to restaurants to take advantage of the two-hundred-plus-year-old promise of the institution: We will restore you. I arrive to eat well and to witness humanity at its best. The other night, inspired by a dinner a couple of years back at Lucky Palace, the elegant Chinese restaurant set in the rear of a tawdry Bossier City, Louisiana, motel, I wok-fried egg foo yong patties and opened a good bottle of white Burgundy. Instead of lacquered pork, cooked in the Malaysian style of proprietor Kuan Lim's youth,

I studded my omelets with hunks of pork shoulder, backyard-smoked in the style of my Georgia youth. It was flat-out delicious. But our home dinner was not as momentous as the one I had enjoyed at Lucky Palace, because Kuan Lim wasn't there, limping the dining room, talking up his latest cellar acquisitions, broadcasting that a fight with cancer won't dim his bright

From left: Lucky Palace proprietor Kuan Lim; Helen Turner, of Helen's Bar-B-Q; Upperline's JoAnn Clevenger.

More Joy

Sean Brock's ode to comfort

Sack sausage biscuits smeared with maple-mustard sauce and topped with runny egg yolks. Joysticks of deep-fried chicken dusted with Szechuan spices. Hand pies gushing with strawberry preserves. Joyland, Sean Brock's new hypercasual café focused on handheld foods, opened in East Nashville just weeks after a deadly tornado tore through the neighborhood, as a pandemic laid low the nation. If that's not joyful, I don't know what is.—J.T.E.

generosity and disarming grin.

Most of the moments I recall at restaurants are discreet and quiet. Waiters and hosts are usually the heroes. But there are exceptions. I remember a date night with my wife, Blair, ten years back in Macon, Georgia. Dinner revolved around a flabby duck breast and a pallid onion soup, delivered to our table with faux French pomposity. The affair was so depressing that, when our waiter left to fetch dessert, I tucked and rolled and somersaulted across the dining room, just to pump helium into a deflated night. We endured the sorry duck, Blair said to me as we walked to our car, but we couldn't endure the dour mood.

When I go out to eat, I go looking for joy. More than dishes, images lodge in my head. Some I capture on my phone, like the shot I took on a December pilgrimage to Doe's Eat Place, the fabled Greenville, Mississippi, steak house. After a long dinner with friends, eaten beneath a mounted goose in a wood-paneled room, we stood in the parking lot, looking at the onetime grocery's moonlit facade, reliving our tri-

umphs, tapping again the dopamine that a good night releases. Imagine a photograph that's three-quarters drunk and smeared with beef fat, and you get the mood. In May, mourning nights like that one, I began using that photo as my Zoom background.

Listen to R.E.M. a lot, as we do around our house, and you hear shards of found poetry that sound like they were borrowed from overheard conversations. If life is an encyclopedia of small moments, as Michael Stipe's lyrics suggest, a big camera roll of quick snapshots, then restaurants and bars are social memory banks. They reflect our lives like fun-house mirrors. Return to a favorite restaurant, slide into a corner booth, indulge in the smells and sights and sounds, and you gain access to what you left behind.

I shot another blurry photo two years back at Kimball House, the oyster and cocktail citadel in Decatur, Georgia. It was closing time. A group of bartenders stood behind a carved wood bar. Just beyond, one had cued a xylophone, and the rest had

begun to sing "How dry I am," a four-beat plaint that, in that sweet moment, marked the end of our night—and the promise that we would soon return.

Bill Joyce and I last dined together in New Orleans last November. He had not been thinking specifically of that night when he texted me. But I soon was. At Upperline, JoAnn Clevenger's Uptown tree house of a restaurant, we had begun a late dinner with Sazeracs and ended with port after a detour for panéed drum, buried in a drift of lump crab. While we waited for that port, I lingered at the stairs, looking down into the lower dining room, where JoAnn tended to the only other table of diners.

When she caught me looking, she smiled and pirouetted, gray hair in a beautiful cyclone bun, hands high in a salute to joy. I snapped a quick shot, to which I have returned often during this long and fitful pause. That photograph reminds me of what it takes, even at the end of a long night, to give your life to hospitality. And it reminds me of what great restaurants give to those of us who love them. ☐



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GOOD HUNTING

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IN THE GARDEN

Tennessee Masterpiece

A CHATTANOOGA COUPLE STYLES A
GARDEN FOR THE SENSES CENTERED
ON AN OLD-WORLD CONSERVATORY

By Lisa Mowry

GOOD HUNTING

Christy and Todd McCain's conservatory features hanging orchids, citrus trees, and a chandelier designed by Floise Pickard. Previous page: The wrought iron and glass structure originated outside of Paris.





The sounds of a cascading fountain, a trickling lily pad pond, a stucco bell tower. The sights of an elephant-shaped topiary, towering Italian cypresses, and a miniature Roman amphitheater. And as you descend the terraced back garden of Christy and Todd McCain in Chattanooga, a jewel box to spark the rest of the senses: a wrought-iron-and-glass conservatory filled with the scent of lemon and lime trees and the touch of the glossy leaves of orchids, orchids everywhere—a fitting structure to complement the couple's 1906 Italianate house.

"The idea was to be authentic to Italianate Renaissance gardens," Todd says of their three acres of period-appropriate garden rooms. "I wanted to have gardens within gardens." But for their botanical treasures—Christy's beloved citrus, and Todd's adored orchids—the couple knew the conservatory would provide the perfect exhibition space when they first spotted the piece at Red Baron Antiques, near Atlanta, more than fifteen years earlier.

When the time came to build their garden, Christy surprised her husband with the structure for his birthday. Laced with ornate scrollwork, the conservatory, the McCains were told, came from a project outside of Paris that never got off the ground. To prepare for the installation, the homeowners graded their sloped lawn to create several terraces to make the approach feel special. They wired for electricity and installed French drains under the concrete foundation, and then covered the floor with pea gravel to help with drainage.

The conservatory arrived in two semitrucks, with pieces of glass and iron spread out over forty crates, and workers with the McCains' landscape architect, Craig Design Group, followed printed instructions to erect the structure. Meanwhile, Christy planned for a signature light fixture in the center, and knew whom to approach: Eloise Pickard, a lighting specialist in Georgia who crafts custom fixtures with a vintage look. Amber glass in the resulting chandelier echoes similar glasswork in the main house. The couple also installed two hundred light bulbs in the interior gutter to cast a glow on the ceiling, creating a fairylike light show in the evening.

Todd inherited his love of orchids from his father, so he always knew any sort of greenhouse they added would be dedicated to the care and display of these mysterious flowers. He began educating himself about orchids and experimenting with sunlight and watering techniques. Eventually he collected several dozen plants of thirteen varieties—many from nearby Lines Orchids—that bloom nine months out of the year. Along the way, he learned that orchids prefer morning light, but not too much of it—the lush ferns hanging from their conservatory ceiling befit a tropical greenhouse, and they also block harsh afternoon sun. To keep them perky, Todd soaks his orchids in a bucket of water for only about fifteen minutes, then lets them drain. Most orchids die because they're overwatered, he says.

Using skills he developed at sea as an officer in the Navy, Todd devised a rope system to artfully display the orchids in wooden vanda boxes. He then hung the boxes at varying heights from the conservatory's ceiling to reference how the plants grow in the wild—often in trees—inspired by a trip he and Christy took to Orchid World & Tropical Flower Garden in Barbados. "We have it set up like an art gallery, where things are at eye level," she says. "You wouldn't look at a painting on the floor, so we didn't want them in a pot."

Besides, Christy's potted citrus trees cover the ground of the conservatory, though in the warmer months she moves them to the sunny patio. Christy, who grew up surrounded by an orange grove in Florida, cultivates lemons, limes, oranges, and grapefruits, and she, Todd, and the couple's three boys feast on the bounty and share bags with the neighbors. "Some years we've harvested three to four hundred pieces of fruit," says Christy, who also makes a mean limoncello liqueur from the leftovers.

The couple's ambition with each of these decisions was to devise a hideaway reminiscent of the erstwhile era when European homeowners fashioned gardens that were decorative and delightful, not just functional. "I love the idea of those Renaissance gardens where people would sit and talk," Todd says. "That's where the secrets were told." □

From left: A vibrant fuchsia orchid; the McCains; an Italian fountain with an acanthus motif.

SOUTHERN STYLE

Iron Vein

EMBRACE THE CAST-IRON LOOK AT
HOME, BEYOND THE SKILLET

By Haskell Harris



GARDEN PARTY

■ From top: Elevate trailing vines and flowers with hanging iron orbs from A Rustic Garden (\$50–\$90; arusticgarden.com); enliven the patio with a Roma outdoor chair by Alabama's Summer Classics, crafted from lightweight, rustproof aluminum with the patina—but without the likely corrosion—of aged wrought iron (\$1,470–\$1,876; summerclassichome.com); or refresh the porch with this mix of iron plant containers from Terrain (flared urns, \$48–\$148, and pedestal, \$68; shopterrain.com).

PROMOTION

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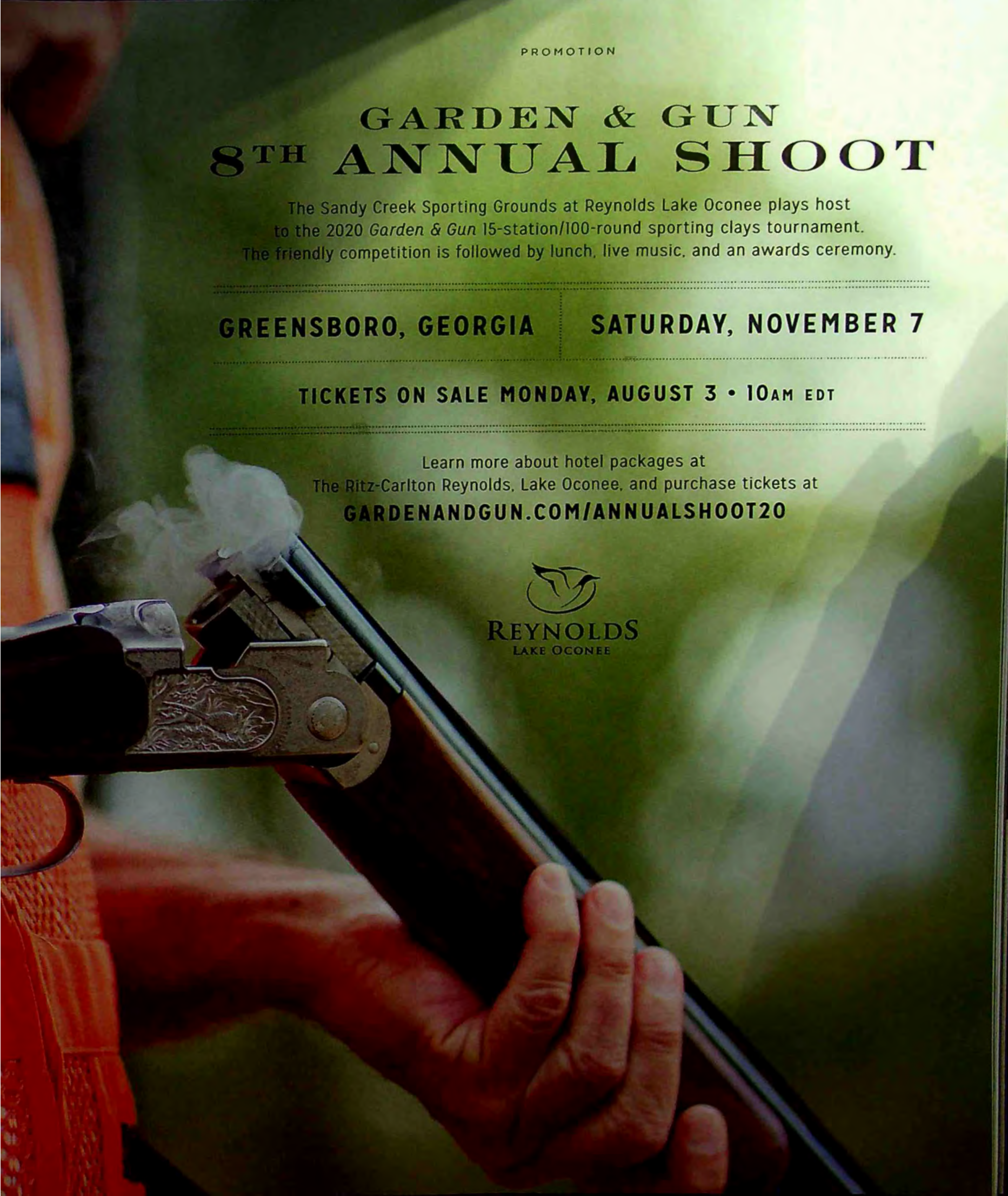
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TOOL TIME

■ Clockwise from top: Build your cast-iron collection in the kitchen with a trivet, such as this one by Le Creuset (\$75; lecreuset.com); a grilled-cheese iron from Cabela's (\$18; cabelas.com); a corn pone pan by Lodge Cast Iron (\$30; lodgecastiron.com); a spice grinder from Frieling (\$39; food52.com); and a biscuit pan by Louisiana's King Kooker (\$37; kingkooker.com). ©

HOMEPLACE

Light in the Woods

AN AIRY FARMHOUSE DRAWS
ONE CREATIVE FAMILY TO THE
MOUNTAINS ALL SUMMER

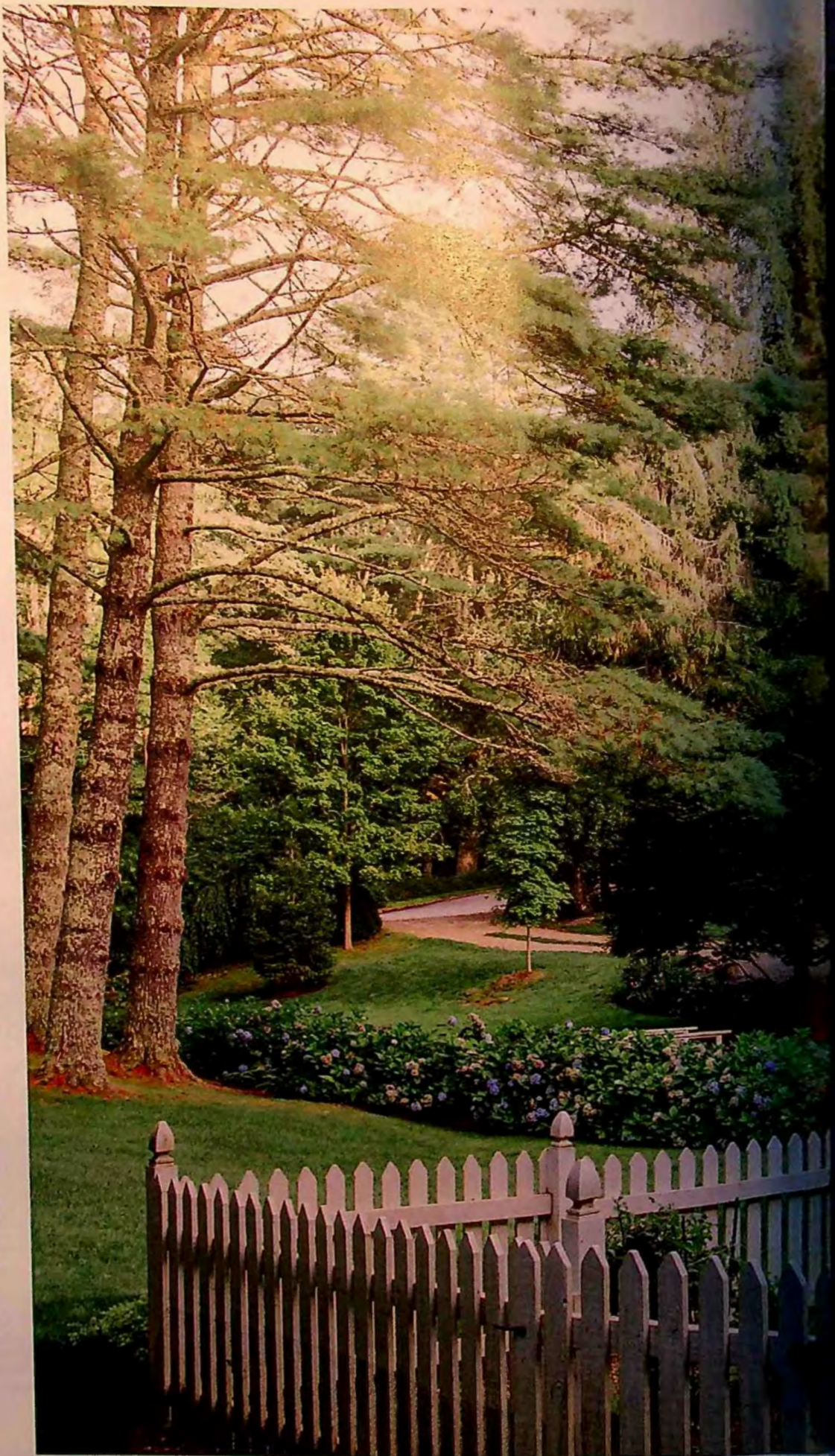
By CJ Lotz

This must be the place. The driveway opens to a flower garden popping with bright dahlias, and giant white hydrangeas frame a clapboard farmhouse. The first time Dave Dawson and his wife, Jennifer, saw the dwelling, tucked beneath a split-rail-fenced meadow in Cashiers, North Carolina, alongside fern-lined creeks, it reminded them both of childhood summers—hers spent camping with family around Northern California, and his with Grandma “Tink.”

“My grandmother had a farm in a holler in West Virginia where my parents would drop me off in the summertime,” Dave says. “With my family moving around a lot, it was the one physical location for me growing up that was always a constant. We wanted a place for our boys where they could create the same type of summer memories of being out and free and wild.”

The Dawsons, who live in Charleston, South Carolina, and started the lighting firm the Urban Electric Co., purchased the nineteenth-century house and its surrounding fifty acres and dubbed it “Tink’s Cottage at Fern Valley.” Like generations of Southerners before them, the couple and their two sons head for the cool mountains in the peak of summer, retreating to their now historic-meets-modern getaway.

Dahlias bloom in late summer at the Dawson family getaway, christened “Tink’s Cottage at Fern Valley.”





GOOD HUNTING



"Perhaps I gave the project its inspiring vision when I asked, 'What would Mick Jagger's gardener's cottage look like?'"

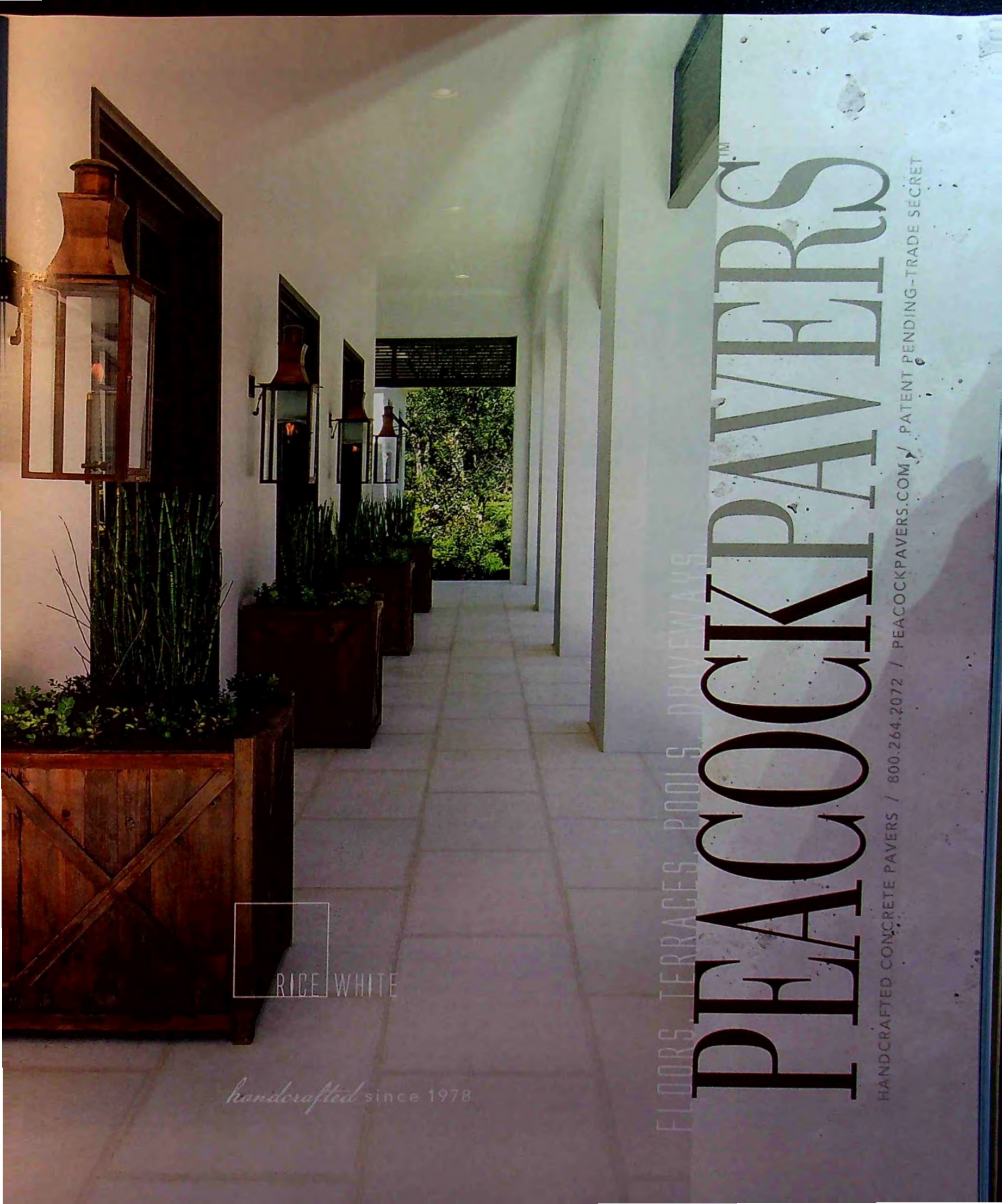


"It's unusual in the North Carolina mountains to find a truly old farmhouse like this," Jennifer says. "Most construction in recent decades has tended toward 'mountain rustic' materials and design." The couple instead wanted an airy look, one that nodded to both the mountain South and the English countryside but wasn't too country-cottage or frilly. "Perhaps I gave the project its inspiring vision when I asked, 'What would Mick Jagger's gardener's cottage look like?'" Jennifer says. "I don't even know if Mick Jagger has a gardener, but I imagine him to be a proper and friendly English chap but slightly irreverent."

Suitably, the design isn't too precious—it's clean, calm, and a little bit rock and roll. The Dawsons consulted with Charleston's Basic Projects on the interiors, layering in their own discoveries, including old table clocks collected from travels in Italy and Spain, vintage music posters, and modern pops of art, such as a giant photograph of a boat by Gately Williams. They kept the original hardwood floors and stone fireplaces but updated the electrical wiring, modernized the kitchen, and added central air and heat. "We were intent on ensuring that none of our renovation felt 'renovated,'" Jennifer explains. "We wanted to keep the simplicity and purity of the original house."

The couple also installed a cedar shake roof—beneath which they follow the two b's and the light: biscuits by morning and

Clockwise from top left: Jennifer and Dave Dawson; their living room; split logs; the kitchen; a vintage sofa reupholstered in Schumacher fabric; in the bathroom, the Urban Electric Co.'s Rex Table lamp and a drawing by the designer Mae Pate.



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GOOD HUNTING



bourbon by night. Each side of an old stone fireplace features a living area, so “we start the day in the sunroom and end the day in the library on the other side, with drinks and music,” Dave says. (Midday is always for outdoor exploration—rambling trails, clipping dahlias and hydrangeas in the garden, or piling into the “Woody,” a Wagoneer, and driving to Lake Glenville for tubing and cruising in a wooden 1956 Century Resorter boat.)

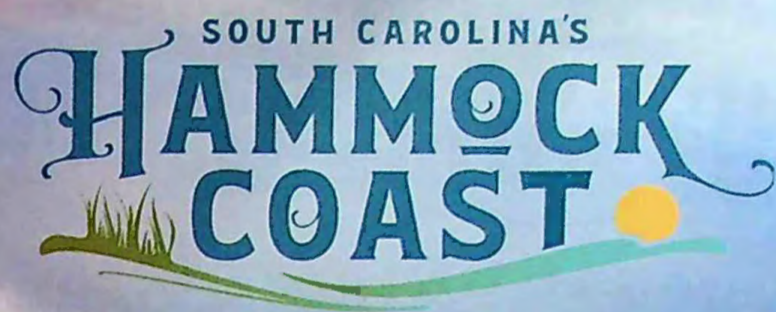
After dinner on the porch, the lights come on. While the Urban Electric Co. has worked with top designers such as Darryl Carter and has installed its custom lighting in such quintessentially Southern spots as Augusta National Golf Club, Blackberry Farm in Tennessee, and the Savannah College of Art and Design, it is here in the little mountain house where some of the company’s smaller fixtures have found their niches. “I always get excited about what the designers have in the pipeline, and what we are developing at the time,” Dave says, “and we found a couple of places to have a tiny little moment of glitz here or there”—solid brass sconces designed by Workstead grace the bathroom; a lantern by Urban’s creative director, Michael Amato, beckons at the doorway.

When the family gathers around the fire in the evening, Jennifer puts on a record—Linda Ronstadt, Dolly Parton, Bill Withers, or maybe even some Rolling Stones. But Mick and his gardener are not the only muses present—in the library hangs an old photo of Dave with his grandmother Tink, the inspiration behind the entire place. When the music stops, it’s time for lights out, Jennifer says. “So we can do it all over again the next day.” ☐



Clockwise from top: A vintage settee and lamp in a nook; the library; hydrangeas over a creek; the boys' bedroom; the Dawson family on the porch; a misty mountain morning.

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BY MELANIE PAUL

Hearing the Call

A DEAF OWNER TRAINS A DEAF SHELTYE TO HELP OTHERS IN NEED



Before I knew Lothair existed, before I laid eyes on Lothair and brought Lothair into our home, I knew he was going to be deaf. I also believed in my heart that he would, someday, against seemingly insurmountable odds, become a registered therapy dog to give emotional support to both children, deaf and nondeaf, and adults. I was determined to do it—it's been documented that some breeders, when a puppy is born deaf or visually impaired, have it put to sleep, because the owner may not want to go to the trouble of training or finding a home for it, or the dog could negatively reflect on breeding stock. If I succeeded, I could show those owners another way.

Lothair, a Shetland sheepdog, was born deaf. I was not. But when I was twelve years old, I lost my hearing when a doctor in my Penn-

sylvania hometown gave me the antibiotic streptomycin, a possible side effect of which was hearing loss. Within the space of three months—from the time I went to the hospital in June of that year until the time I started back at school in September—I had lost 90 percent of my hearing.

Still, I know what it's like to be able to hear, which made lipreading easy to pick up quickly, and I learned sign language in college. I decided I wanted to help others like me—I earned advanced degrees, including a master's in counseling and guidance, and an educational specialist degree from William & Mary in Virginia. For decades, I worked in deaf education.

In 2000, I decided to train my first sheltie, Shiloh, so he could participate in animal-assisted therapy. I had grown up with collies, which are similar to shelties, and I knew that their affectionate,

eager-to-please temperaments would be perfect for providing emotional support. The process, though, is intense—the dog must ace thirteen tests, given by a trained evaluator from Therapy Dogs International (TDI), that assess personality, obedience, calmness, and socialization, with people of all ages as well as other therapy dogs. Shiloh passed his evaluation the first time he tried, and over the next eight years, he and I took a journey of joy and happiness, visiting people in such places as hospitals, schools, retirement homes, and libraries. Eventually, I welcomed into my home two more shelties, Molly and Locksley, and they too became therapy dogs in Hampton, Virginia, where my husband and I had moved for his job in the military at Langley Air Force Base.

In 2008, I set my heart on a new goal: acquiring a deaf sheltie. I knew from my years working in deaf education that deaf children would benefit greatly from bonding with a deaf dog—they would see that the dog understood sign language, and they could both identify with and take comfort in that. I contacted a reputable breeder of Shetland sheepdogs and asked her to put out a call to her contacts for anyone who might have a deaf sheltie. A show-dog breeder in North Carolina responded, and we brought Lothair home that October.

Lothair came to us when he was three months old. He is a double merle, the result of two blue merle shelties being bred together—an action generally considered unethical, since the resulting litter often includes a dog born white (not a recognized show-dog color), as Lothair was, due to a genetic mutation, and at a high risk for hearing and visual impairments. I named him for a medieval French king I had once read about—even at that young age, he already had the stance and dignity of royalty.

The commands needed to communicate with the pup required a special kind of patience. At first, I enrolled Lothair in two dog obedience schools in Hampton, but the instructors were unfamiliar with how to teach a deaf dog. I thought back to my own experience and knowledge. Just like deaf children, Lothair would need to learn through his eyes, and not his ears—he would be *seeing* voices. So I began teaching him American Sign Language (ASL), one sign at a time, in the same manner I had helped deaf children acquire language: showing the object—say, a biscuit—or per-

forming the act, such as getting his leash to “go for a walk.”

Neither his breeder nor the instructors at the obedience schools had any hope Lothair would develop the skills needed to pass the stringent TDI evaluation. But I knew I could prove them wrong. My maxim is “All dogs can learn, but not in the same way, or on the same day.” The basic principles of training a deaf or nondeaf dog are the same: patience, control, motivation, and love.

Within two weeks, Lothair was responding to the signs for food (or “eat”), biscuit, go for potty, and sit. And over the next three months, he learned and responded to the signs for come, stay, water, good boy, time to go to work, no, stop, watch me, wait, apple (a treat), “chick-chick” (I used boiled chicken breast as a positive reinforcement), tickle-tickle (for playtime), and go for a walk. When I wanted to praise him, I shook my hands in the air near my face while smiling—the ASL sign for “well done.” I also enrolled Lothair at puppy playdates where he interacted with other puppies, for a therapy dog must develop good socialization skills. While I was teaching Lothair ASL, my other two shelties also picked up the signs.

When Lothair was one, I decided he was ready to be evaluated by TDI. He passed all thirteen test areas on his first try, and he received his American Kennel Club Good Citizen Award and certification as a registered therapy dog. In the ten years since, Lothair has made more than 750 pet therapy visits to local hospitals, including to the one at Langley, where I began an animal-assisted therapy program in 2009; schools, where he serves as a companion to both deaf and nondeaf children as they read; library reading programs; retirement and rehabilitation facilities; and community events.

So many moments with Lothair have touched my heart. The young girl with limited mobility at the Langley hospital, for instance, whose mother said she had never shown interest in dogs; yet the girl reached down from her special-needs stroller to pet Lothair, and kept her eyes on him as we

moved away. Then Lothair stopped, turned around, and looked at her, and the child slowly got out of her stroller and walked toward us, her hands held out for him. Or the little boy with Down syndrome, who would read only to Lothair. Or the man at a rehab hospital recovering from a stroke, who regained strength in his hand and arm by stroking Lothair.

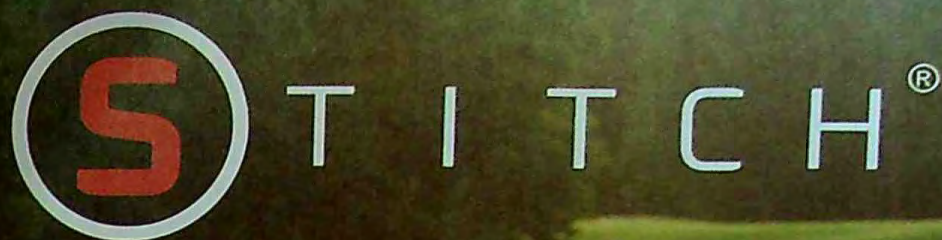
In return for his service, TDI awarded Lothair its highest honor—a gold pin when he achieved five hundred documented visits—and he has also received the Air Force ACC/SG Real Pro Award for his work at Langley (a recognition typically given to military staff) and in 2017 the Virginia Veterinary Medical Association Animal Hero Award, an honor bestowed to only one dog each year from the various service, police, assistance, and therapy canine professions across the state. Newspapers local and beyond have featured his works—not bad for a dog most doubted.

Indeed, here is a dog who has overcome the barrier of deafness, who can communicate with me, and who demonstrates daily his quiet courage to understand his environment through his reasoning, sense of smell, and eyes (even after one of them succumbed four years ago to a genetic cataract). Lothair has dignity, intelligence, and a willingness to please. He is a bright, confident, and happy sheltie, whom I love with all my heart.

The fact that we’re both deaf causes the essence of our souls to blend. I vowed to teach him everything I can, to be his protector, help him in his daily needs, and shower him with love. His developing into a remarkable therapy dog is a promise I am proud to have kept.

Lothair’s parents were champion Shetland sheepdogs. Thoroughbreds. But not all thoroughbreds are born from illustrious parentage, or champion stud lines. Some are made or become a “champion” through determination, courage, love, and the fact that they got a chance to show what they can do despite barriers or disabilities. Lothair is both. He was born to champion parents, and he became a “champion.” He is a true thoroughbred, body and soul. □

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BY JULIA REED

Cooking through COVID

ON MAIL-ORDER FOOD, DINNER WITH MOM, AND A WHOLE BUNCH OF SARDINES



On Monday, March 16, I launched into a full-on cooking frenzy. I had left New Orleans, where I live part of the time, for the Mississippi Delta to avoid the end of Mardi Gras. As the world now knows, I avoided a lot more than that. On the same day, the New Orleans mayor more or less locked the place down; on Friday one of my oldest and closest friends came down with COVID-19. She is now fine, but within two weeks cases had exploded across the city. Feeling helpless and isolated (well, not completely—I had the ever-trusty Henry the

beagle and a veritable bird sanctuary for company), I ordered a ton of food online. If I am honest, I was driven at least as much by the desire to never ever set foot inside Kroger or Walmart again, or at least not for a very long time. And then, you know, the food arrives in all these coolers and boxes and you feel compelled to cook it.

Included in the stash were whole briskets with which I made my own corned beef (not nearly as good as that found at Stein's in New Orleans—first lesson learned) and a supremely time-consuming recipe from my beloved Suzanne Goin that involved marinating and braising the meat, which was then accompanied

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THE HIGH & THE LOW

by a horseradish crema and a potato puree that required two types of potato. I made Lidia Bastianich's Bolognese sauce, ramp pesto, at least three of Nigella Lawson's ridiculously easy and tasty clementine cakes. In the weeks leading up to Easter, I researched English hot cross buns, ordered a slew of dried fruit to go in them, and ended up opting for an English muffin with marmalade on the morning of. I learned to spatchcock a chicken (why have I not been doing this all my life?) and made tons of stock with the bones. One day I went especially bananas and ordered two dozen cans of sardines and mackerel in olive oil—each. I had visions of making a French potato salad with tarragon and chives and the mackerel with a lemony aioli on the side. Sounds lovely, doesn't it? Next month perhaps, when I can face peeling another potato. As I type, there is another brisket and an entire side of bacon in the freezer.

What I realized is that while cooking for oneself is supposed to be a healthy expression of self-love, self-care, whatever, it is cooking for other people that really brings me joy. In those very early days, the only beneficiary was Henry, who will now barely eat his own food, knowing as he does that if he is patient enough and makes enough noise (an unsettling new development), he will be the happy recipient of sourdough croutons, morsels of chicken, a chunk of Parmesan or Vermont cheddar, or a slice of prosciutto that is better suited to wrapping round the incredible cantaloupe my friend Rabbit brings me every Thursday when the melon man sets up a stand on the highway. I was, until not too long ago, a creature of restaurants and the night. Henry knew he had best eat his own food if he wanted to eat at all.

By the end of the first week, I was sharing with two-legged folk, leaving packages on the hoods of my friends' cars and receiving the same. Rabbit brought me the melon, fresh eggs, homemade wine vinegar, divine runny cheese, and the best vichyssoise I've ever tasted. In return, I took him olive oil cake, the aforementioned pesto, tarragon from the herb garden I planted, the pâtés I continually overorder. My mother sent me bits of almost everything she made (including tomato aspic, blackberry cobbler, and a congealed cranberry salad I have loved since childhood), and I returned the favor. On Mother's Day we

sat at opposite ends of my outdoor table and shared a rack of lamb with an inspired mint sauce (chicken stock, fish sauce, honey, a ton of mint, and the lamb jus).

It was magic. We had missed each other. We had cocktails and looked at the trees I'd just planted and drank a bottle of delicious Pomerol with dinner. Then came the gnats. It is not enough that we are living through a full-fledged plague. If you live where I do, you also have plenty of pestilence. This year, during one of the most beautiful springs of my lifetime, millions of buffalo gnats (so named because they are fat, brown, and furry) were encouraged by the high water to cross the river from Arkansas, effectively ruining our lives. Nothing kills them, though they are (very) mildly deterred by a spray called Buggins, which is not ideal perfume for dining, or (rumor has it) a scent from Victoria's Secret that I imagine to be worse. They stick

rearing their ugly heads, and the editors in New York sent me to check out the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord, a particularly nasty bunch who referred to the U.S. government as ZOG (Zionist Occupied Government) and were preparing for the end-times in a camp somewhere in the Ozarks, not far from where the Netflix show starring Jason Bateman and Laura Linney is set. In retrospect, I should have been a tad more nervous about charging up in there in the company of a mouthy photographer, but when I called the leader, I realized he craved attention and, anyway, I knew these guys. Like almost every redneck with whom I grew up, they didn't want to pay taxes, didn't want to send their kids to school with African Americans (though that is certainly not the term they used), didn't want to hear from their "women" (whom they housed in a separate dorm with the kids, who received little education

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around until it's too hot to go outside, which means I'm going to have to start sleeping on plastic sheets—my brand-new embroidered cotton numbers (food is not remotely the only thing I've been ordering online) look like Zorro has been after me. The welts (which don't respond to even the highest prescription of cortisone) make mosquito bites look like pindots.

I realize that in the hideous and highly unfair world we are living in, it seems pretty petty to bitch about gnats. And perhaps even pettier to damn the whole of Arkansas as their benighted source. I have a lot of fine friends from the Arkansas Delta, but I personally have witnessed some seriously bad stuff going on in the rest of the state. When I was twenty-two and working for the summer in *Newsweek's* Atlanta bureau, a lot of white-supremacist groups were

and went mostly barefoot), did not, when it came down to it, want to have their dubious manhood messed with in any way. They sat around and told dirty jokes and read porn and scratched their hairy stomachs. But they also wore MAC-10 submachine guns crossed over those big bellies and had a fleet of tanks on the premises, along with an anti-tank rocket launcher and piles of sawed-off shotguns. For fun every night, they practiced shooting moving plywood cutouts of people inside "homes" in a "community" they dubbed Silhouette City. After three days, I badly wanted to get out of there and urged the magazine not to give them the cover story they so desperately craved. The FBI finally took them down, but not until after they'd trained many like-minded folks to go out and wreak their own havoc and one of the

members shot a gun store owner and an African American police officer. I drove away over a gorge on a bridge the Klan was said to have wired with explosives in case they needed a no-access safe harbor, and what I know now is that I should never have been so cavalier in my assessment of these bozos, examples of another kind of pestilence that has infected American life from the get-go. These guys were like the damn gnats: You don't always see them coming and you don't know the harm they've done until you're practically bleeding to death.

So what to do? While we are faced with larger reckonings, the smaller act of cooking suddenly doesn't seem so crazy. We are, most of us, in the midst of a national wake, grieving for an ever-growing number of lives lost and dreams—still—deferred. Where I come from, a wake demands food, a lot of it. My mother is a master of the art of the funeral lunch. Black churches usually call them repasts. By any name, I see piles of fried chicken, squash casserole, pound cakes, cornbread, green beans cooked forever with ham hocks, potato salad, macaroni with a ton of cheese. When my aunt died, I arrived at her house after a long drive, expecting to see at least one or two of those things on the dining room table. Instead there was bad take-out Chinese. Where the hell was the love in that?

Everyone I know has a signature dish for such occasions. My dear friend Helen Bransford, who knows a lot about a lot of things, always brings tomato sandwiches, an inspired idea if you think about it, perfect for nervous pick-up eating and exactly what anybody with any sense wants to eat. I will be making a whole lot of those in the coming days, peeling the tomatoes, as my mother always does, and spreading the crustless white bread with her sublime homemade mayonnaise. I want the lobster roll I perfected last summer on Martha's Vineyard, Gulf shrimp boiled for a nano-second and eaten, still steaming, from the colander in the sink. I'll make "fried" corn off the cob, okra and tomatoes, thick Roman steaks with garlic and rosemary like the ones at Nino in Rome, a place I will most likely not visit anytime soon. This is less ambitious than my original crazed efforts but far more soul filling. Meanwhile, if the end-times do come, I have a whole lot of mackerel and sardines to get me through. ☐

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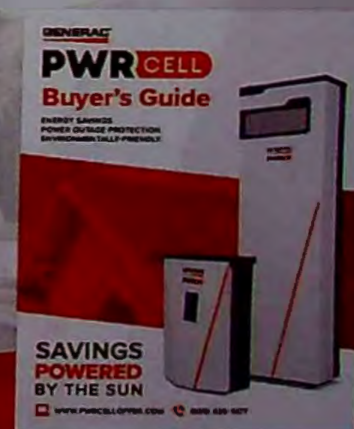
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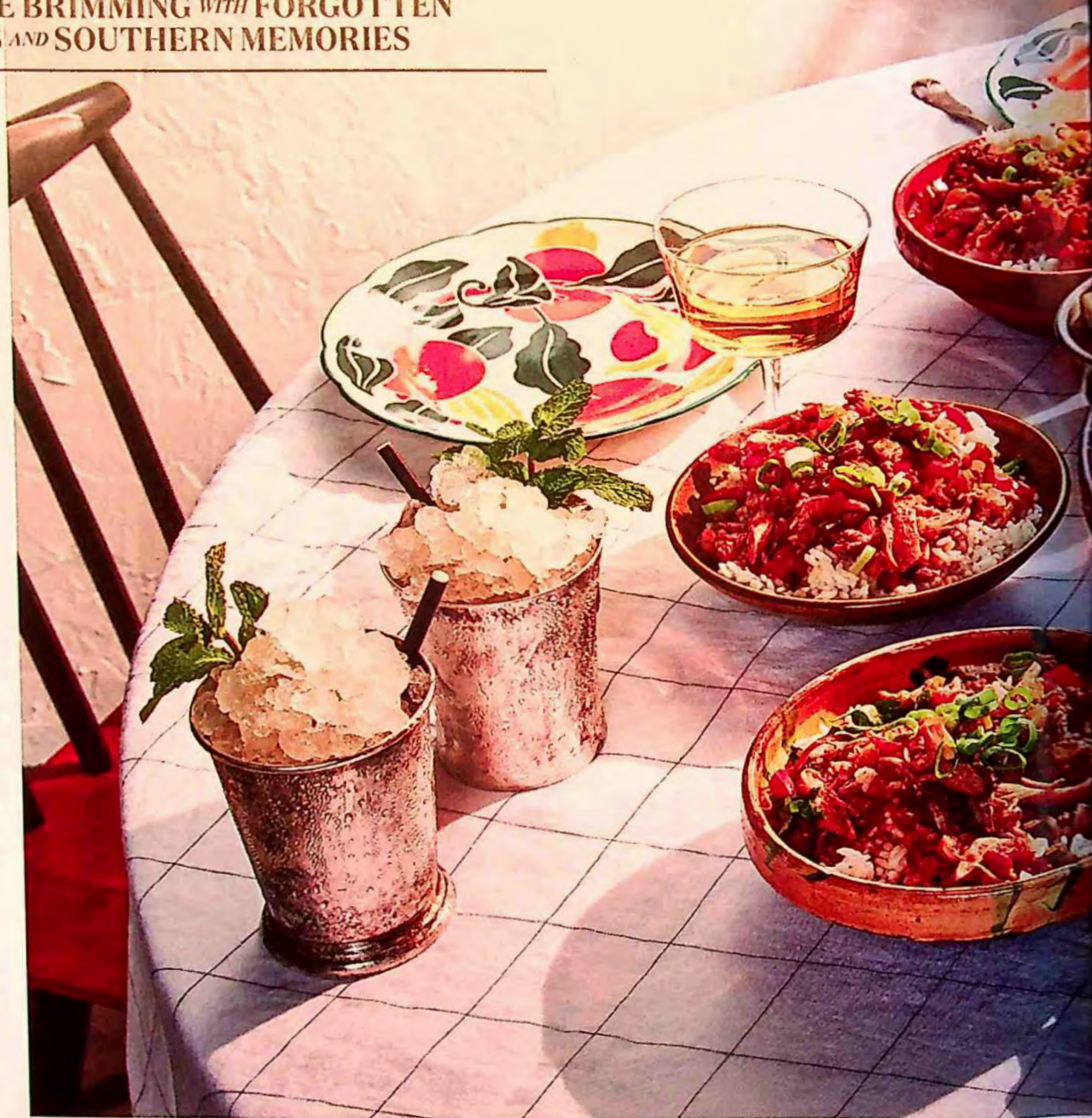
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RECIPES: 1. GEORGIA PEACH JULEP 2. WATERMELON RIND PICKLES 3. POKE SALLET 4. CHICKEN BOG 5. CARAMEL CAKE WITH PECANS



PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JOHNNY AUTRY

FOOD AND PROP STYLING BY
CHARLOTTE AUTRY

I

THE COCKTAIL

Drink a Peach

A GEORGIA-BRED VERSION OF THE ORIGINAL MINT JULEP

BY WAYNE CURTIS

Are you sitting down? I'm afraid I have bad news. Your mint julep may be a fraud.

If you've ever argued over what goes into the original julep—rye or bourbon—those are hours you can't have back. Because the original julep was almost certainly made not with whiskey, but with brandy.

Perhaps you should lie down and apply a cold compress. Because I now feel compelled to add that many early juleps most likely involved *peach* brandy.

It's hard to comprehend today, but peach brandy was once among the most sought-after of domestic tipples. It was common throughout the South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because peaches were common. Vast orchards planted far and wide produced abundant fruit both for eating and cooking (as well as to feed the hogs). Problem was, summer peaches were difficult to get to market before they spoiled.

Distilling provided a way to preserve that warm summer flavor. The apex of the peach brandy era happened to correspond with the peak of the julep craze, which is to say around the mid-1800s. A common variation, called the Georgia julep, typically called for half peach brandy and half grape brandy. Mint was considered optional (maybe another cold compress?), but its absence was often lamented. A well-known 1869 bartending manual noted that a julep without mint "is like the play of Hamlet, with the prince left out."

Peach brandy essentially went extinct with advances in canning and the rise of refrigerated trains and trucks that allowed peaches to be shipped to distant markets, diminishing the incentive to decant bushels into bottles. When a yearning for a peach drink arose, chemists stepped into the breach, producing peach-like flavors. (Think: Snapple.)

A few intrepid modern distillers—including High Wire Distilling in Charleston, South Carolina, and Catocin Creek in Purcellville, Virginia—have produced limited bottlings of colonial-style peach brandy, which is not the same as the peach-flavored brandy commonly occupying liquor store shelves. These days true peach brandy is as rare as an August snowstorm. While awaiting the flakes, though, you can concoct a rough approximation. I recommend mixing one part imported peach liqueur (Mathilde is good), one part vodka, and three parts apple brandy (such as that from Copper & Kings in Kentucky, or Laird's Applejack, which is made in Virginia). For the final touch, add some drops of almond extract (about four or five drops per cup)—the original peach brandy was made by fermenting the fruit with its pits, which lent a marzipan note. Rebottle and recork. Your peaches will be waiting when you want them.





RECIPE:

Georgia Peach Julep

Yield: 1 cocktail

INGREDIENTS

8-10 mint leaves
½ oz. simple syrup
Crushed ice,
pebble-sized
1¼ oz. peach brandy
(or see instructions
on opposite page to
approximate)
1¼ oz. cognac
(VS or VSOP)
Mint sprig,
for garnish

PREPARATION

Muddle mint leaves in simple syrup, preferably in a julep cup. Fill cup with crushed ice. Add peach brandy and cognac. Stir lightly, then add additional ice to form a small mound. Garnish with top of mint sprig. Insert steel or paper straw.

2

THE APPETIZER

Preserving Memories

LONG A STAPLE ON
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN TABLE,
WATERMELON RIND PICKLES
ARE A GIFT OF SUMMER

BY JESSICA B. HARRIS

They were an annual treat that made their appearance in a cut crystal dish next to the celery hearts, colossal pimento-stuffed olives, and carrot sticks. They only showed up briefly for Thanksgiving dinner, and I waited patiently to savor their spicy sweetness all year long. I would later learn that watermelon rind pickles represent the best of Southern frugality, taking what would otherwise be discarded and transforming it into something tasty—in this case into the star of a relish tray, or bacon wrapped and broiled for a sweet and savory hors d'oeuvre, or coupled with thinly sliced ham in a biscuit or with a few slices of roast pork. Although the pickles disappeared from my life after my maternal grandmother's death, I loved them even more in memory, factoring in the knowledge that they were hand prepared from a Virginia recipe she never shared with her daughters and that went with her to the grave.

Watermelon rind pickles have been in the African American culinary lexicon for more than a century, and a version appeared in *What Mrs. Fisher Knows about Old Southern Cooking*, the second known African American cookbook, published in 1881. Post-Emancipation, the book's author, Abby Fisher, made her way from Alabama to California, where she is listed in the 1882 San Francisco City Directory as a pickle manufacturer. More recently, the pickles became a means of survival. Patsy Randolph, an African American entrepreneur in Harlem during the Great Depression, collected watermelon rinds from street vendors and transformed them into pickles that she sold along with pepper sauces and relishes. The pickles were her biggest sellers.

Haunted by my childhood delight, I set out to recreate my grandmother's pickles and came up with a recipe that while not exactly replicating hers, comes closer in taste than any of the commercial brands I've tried, which trade a complex spice-infused flavor for sugary sweetness. Though I prepare them infrequently, they're one of the first items that I think of for special meals for their ability to evoke the taste of memory.





RECIPE:

Watermelon Rind Pickles

(Adapted from *The Martha's Vineyard Table* by Jessica B. Harris)

INGREDIENTS

9 cups cubed watermelon rind (1-inch cubes)
½ cup salt
2 qt. plus 2 cups water
1¼ cups cider vinegar
½ cup balsamic vinegar
2 cups firmly packed brown sugar
1 lemon, thinly sliced
½ tsp. fresh ginger, minced
2 cinnamon sticks, crushed
¾ tsp. whole cloves
2 tsp. allspice berries, crushed
Note: The amount of spices may be slightly varied to individual taste for a unique and personalized flavor.

PREPARATION

As you prepare the watermelon rind for cubing, be sure to remove all the green skin and all but a small amount of the red meat. Combine the salt and 2 quarts water in a bowl large enough to accommodate the cubed rind, and stir to dissolve the salt. Submerge the rind in the brine and let soak overnight.

Drain the rind, rinse with fresh water, and drain again. Place rind in a large nonreactive saucepan, add water to cover, and place over medium heat. Bring to a simmer and cook uncovered for 15 minutes or until fork tender.

Meanwhile, combine 2 cups water, cider vinegar, balsamic vinegar, brown sugar, lemon slices, and spices in another nonreactive saucepan and bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly to dissolve the sugar. Lower heat to a simmer and cook for 15 minutes or until a thin syrup forms.

Drain the watermelon rind and add it to the simmering syrup and continue to simmer for about 20 minutes or until the rind is translucent. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the rind to hot sterilized canning jars. Ladle in the hot unstrained syrup to cover, allowing about ¼-inch headroom, then cover tightly.

Process the jars in a hot-water bath for 25 minutes. Remove from the bath, let cool, and check the seal. If you find a jar without a good seal, store it in the refrigerator; the rinds will keep for up to a month. Store jars with a good seal in a cool dark place for up to several months—if the pickles don't get eaten first.

Wild Harvest

A FORAGER'S DELIGHT STEEPED IN SOUTHERN INGENUITY

BY LATRIA GRAHAM

I always look for pokeweed first. Right after the daffodils start to bloom but before the monarch butterflies come back, before the strawberries catch their color and asparagus gets that violet tinge, when the bluebirds start singing and the cardinals come around again, I know it's time to start scanning the edges of the woods for the scarlet-stalked plant my family considers to be "good eating." We aren't the only ones fond of this towering weed found throughout the South. Indigenous people have used the pokeweed plant for herbal medicine for centuries, but its traditional Southern culinary preparation was probably born out of desperation. After families ate through their stockpiles of preserved food during a hard winter, pokeweed was one of the first edible greens to appear every year.

Pokeweed, or poke sallet, as it's known once it's cooked, is survival food. But it's on par with morels for the complexity and versatility it can attain in the hands of a capable cook.

Often compared to spinach and less desired by mainstream cooks than ramps and lamb's-quarter, pokeweed remains a sought-after delicacy for my family. It's tough to cultivate, so hunting for the wild plant is an annual routine much like spring cleaning. Come early March, I start watching areas of disturbed earth and unkempt old homesites—places it likes to grow. I learned most of what I know about pokeweed from my paternal grandmother, Grandma Mary. It's known to be toxic when not prepared correctly, and there are many rules she taught me about harvesting the plant—don't pick it near roadways because of the exhaust and pesticides, don't eat the plum-colored berries, and don't mess with the root, the most poisonous part. When it comes to cooking pokeweed, the main thing to remember is to boil the leaves twice to get rid of the toxins.

There are songs about the plant, like "Polk Salad Annie," and stories, folktales really, about what happens to people who disobey the elders' warnings. I have two cousins, Chris and Larry, who can never get along, and their childhood shenanigans at family gatherings were always slightly over the top, like putting peaches in a rival's tailpipe. The way Grandma told it, their mother ate the berries from the pokeweed plant when she was pregnant with them, and they never stood a chance of being normal.

Everybody in my family puts their own spin on poke sallet. I like to fold my boiled leaves into a quiche, and my father used to sauté his harvest with onions and eggs. Grandma Mary made hers the traditional way, as we would prepare tender turnip or mustard greens—a little salted pork for flavoring, with some cornbread on the side to round out the meal.





RECIPE:

Poke Sallet

Yield: 3-4 servings

INGREDIENTS

*2 lb. pokeweed leaves
½ lb. hog jowl, sliced (you can substitute bacon or country ham)
1 medium yellow onion, diced
Salt and pepper*

PREPARATION

Bring 6 quarts water to a rolling boil, add pokeweed leaves, and continue boiling for 20 minutes. Remove the froth (scum) floating on top, discard hot water, and rinse leaves in cold water. Repeat the boil and rinse process, then drain the greens in a colander. In a frying pan, cook up hog jowl (or bacon or country ham) until brown, then remove from the skillet. Use the remaining drippings to sauté onion until translucent. Add the boiled leaves and the pork to the frying pan with ½ cup water, and cook for an additional 15 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

4

THE MAIN

High on the Bog

CHICKEN, SAUSAGE, AND
RICE FORM A BEAUTIFUL UNION
IN THIS POTFUL OF SOUTH
CAROLINA COMFORT

BY MATT LEE AND TED LEE

Celebrating regional dishes, we always feel a pang of regret. Place an icon like Nashville hot chicken, say, or New Orleans gumbo on a pedestal, and it's inevitable that its culinary siblings—no less delicious, no less geographically distinct—are missing out on the spotlight. What chance does corned ham have in the whole-hog barbecue mecca of Eastern North Carolina? Or a street vendor's rice calas sharing the neighborhood with Café Du Monde's sugary beignets? Here in the South Carolina Lowcountry, shrimp and grits never fails to steal the show from our beloved chicken bog (and from many other dishes).

Perhaps the best word to describe chicken bog is one used by the late culinary historian Joseph E. Dabney, author of the 2010 book *The Food, Folklore, and Art of Lowcountry Cooking*: “unheralded.” Proof of this: While we grew up just a couple of hours down the interstate from bog's ground zero in South Carolina's Pee Dee region, encompassing the towns of Florence, Conway, and Loris (which hosted its fortieth annual Loris Bog-Off Festival last year), our own first taste of chicken bog only came when we were in our thirties, in the Church Street kitchen of our friend, the Charleston painter and arts educator Janet Hopkins. We devoured it. Richly flavored—and alluringly, aptly named—this semi-soggy chicken-sausage-and-rice medley was comfort's essence.

Chicken bog is like a wetter jambalaya or pilau, and, like those dishes, has origins in the West African rice kitchen that proliferated in the state during the years enslaved Africans worked rice plantations from the Pee Dee region down to what we now call the ACE Basin. Some writers (Dabney included) surmise from oral histories a connection between the “boggier” preparation and the fact that the dish was typically cooked outdoors in large quantities, a community repast on the order of Kentucky burgoo or Virginia's Brunswick stew, concentrating and complexifying over hours.

Our own recipe brings the dish indoors. And while traditionalists may tut that we serve the stewed chicken over cooked rice (a more accessible preparation for home cooks as opposed to cooking up the rice with the chicken in its own broth), there's no scrimping on chicken-love in our version, as we preserve the giblets that traditionally give this stew such a deep and rich, rustic flavor. No regrets here.





RECIPE:

Chicken Bog

Yield: 6 servings

INGREDIENTS

1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil, canola oil, peanut oil, or lard
1 (4½-to-5-lb.) chicken, quartered and skinned, giblets finely chopped
½ lb. sweet Italian sausage (about 4 links), cut from casing
1 cup full-bodied red wine, such as merlot, cabernet, or Syrah
3 tbsp. unsalted butter
2 tbsp. all-purpose flour
2 cups chopped yellow onion (about 2 large onions)
1¼ cups chopped celery (about 6 stalks)
2 cups chopped red or green bell peppers (about 3 peppers)
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 (28-oz.) can diced tomatoes
2 tbsp. minced fresh thyme
2 cups chicken broth
Kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper
½ cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
½ cup chopped green onions

PREPARATION

Place oil in an 8-quart stockpot or Dutch oven and heat over medium-high heat. When the oil shimmers, add the chicken pieces to the pot (don't crowd them; brown in batches, 2 at a time, if necessary) and sear until golden brown on both sides, about 4 minutes per side. Remove and reserve in a bowl. Add sausage and chicken giblets to the pot and stir, breaking up the sausage with a wooden spoon. Cook until completely browned, about 6 minutes. Remove and reserve in the bowl with the chicken.

Add the wine to the pot and bring to a boil over high heat, stirring with a wooden spoon to scrape up any browned bits on the bottom. Boil until the wine is reduced by one-quarter, about 4 minutes. Pour the reduced wine over the reserved meats.

Turn the heat down to medium-high and add the butter. When it has melted, stir in the flour. Stir constantly for 2 minutes until smooth, then add onion, celery, peppers, and garlic and sauté, stirring constantly, until the onions begin to turn translucent, the peppers begin to pale, and the flour has turned a pale tan, about 6 minutes. Add tomatoes, the contents of the reserving bowl, thyme, and broth, cover, and

bring to a vigorous simmer over medium-high heat. Turn the heat to low, uncover, and simmer gently for 25 minutes, or until the broth has reduced by about one-quarter. Turn off the heat.

With tongs, transfer the chicken pieces to a bowl or a cutting board with a drain. When they are cool enough to handle, pick the meat from the bones and discard the bones. Return the picked chicken to the pot, turn the heat to medium, and simmer for 15 minutes, breaking the chicken into threads as you stir. Turn off the heat and season to taste with salt and pepper.

Let rest for 5 minutes before serving in deep bowls. (For optimal flavor, "cure" in the refrigerator for 24 hours; if you wish, spoon the fat from the surface before reheating.) Serve over hot white rice, garnished with parsley and green onions.

A Cake for the Ages

THE OWNER OF VIRGINIA'S RED TRUCK BAKERY SHARES A CARAMEL CAKE DRIPPING WITH SOUTHERN MEMORIES

BY BRIAN NOYES

I hadn't thought about caramel cakes until I heard about Mrs. Beavers.

I had been digging through my grandmother's collection of recipes while resurrecting heirloom desserts for my rural Virginia bakery, hoping to find some kind of long-lost cake that needed a little light shone on it. But so far I was flummoxed.

Within a week, as it happened, a customer asked me if I could revive a cake beloved among the townsfolk of The Plains, a little burg up the road. "Mrs. Beavers, now gone, was famous for her caramel layer cake that still haunts us all," he told me, providing a skimpy list of ingredients from family members uncertain about the preparation. I began searching through vintage cookbooks for caramel cakes, but the recipes glossed over the cake part—usually stating only to "make a simple yellow batter"—and focused on the mishaps of working with caramel, which tends to burn or harden quickly. I followed one of those recipes, not loving the cake's dry results. But I was smitten with the richness of home-cooked caramel and yearned to upgrade this disappearing jewel. The key to the solution was another week away.

I had been shipping baked goods to friends in the fashion designer Billy Reid's office in Florence, Alabama. Intrigued by our cakes, Reid began talking about an idea that would provide vital clues to the Mrs. Beavers cake mystery. "I have a memory of a recipe from my great-grandmother," he told me. "She ran the high school lunchroom for thirty-five years in Kentwood, Louisiana, and baked cakes in the back of her house for weddings and who knows what." The cake he pined for was one that her daughter—his grandmother—had continued to make. "It was sort of a caramel cake mixed with a cream-cheese-like pound cake. It had a slightly crusty top, and it dripped with a caramel coating. There may have been pecans." He then asked, "Is that something you might be able to mess with?"

I rolled up my sleeves. In the bakery's kitchen, standing next to Jan Pouzenc, my pie maker, I dipped into a bubbling pot of her caramel sauce, rich with cream and butter, destined for our salted caramel apple pies. I added the caramel to my cake batter, along with a fistful of pecans, and knowing how well caramel and apples play together, I poured in some apple juice to add another layer of flavor. I experimented with several recipe versions, brushing more warm caramel onto the cake so it soaked into the crust. Soon another UPS shipment arrived in Alabama. This one, Reid said, nailed it.

Employing what I'd learned, I returned to Mrs. Beavers's caramel layer cake. Adding pecans created more interest, and with some cream cheese and awash with our caramel, inside and out, it surely wasn't dry. Finally, I covered it with a thin coat of white frosting with additional caramel dripping from above. I'm happy to say that while it may not be Mrs. Beavers's exact recipe, it has proved to be every bit the cake that her many admirers feared was lost. ☐

RECIPE:

Red Truck Bakery Caramel Cake with Pecans

Yield: One 9-inch, 2-layer cake

INGREDIENTS

For the caramel:

3 cups sugar
1 cup water
2 cups heavy cream, at room temperature
2 cups (4 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature
2 tbsp. pure vanilla extract
1 tsp. kosher salt

For the cake:

Nonstick cooking spray
2 cups sugar
½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature
¼ cup cream cheese, softened
½ cup caramel
4 large eggs
1 tsp. pure vanilla extract
2½ cups unbleached all-purpose flour, sifted
2 tsp. baking powder
¼ tsp. kosher salt
¾ cup whole milk
¼ cup apple juice
1 cup coarsely chopped pecans

For the frosting:

1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature
¼ cup caramel
4½ cups confectioners' sugar
1 tsp. pure vanilla extract

PREPARATION

For the caramel:

This calls for close attention; don't wander off or you'll burn the caramel. In a large saucepan over high heat, combine the sugar and water, brushing down the sides with a wet pastry brush to prevent sugar crystals from forming. Continue cooking on high heat; cook until the sugar is dissolved (don't stir) for 20 minutes or until the caramel turns a deep golden tan but not too brown. Remove from heat; add the cream, butter, vanilla, and salt; and stir with a wooden spoon until thoroughly combined.

For the cake:

Preheat oven to 375°F. Lightly coat two 9-inch round cake pans with nonstick spray. Line the bot-

oms with parchment paper out to fit and spray the parchment with nonstick spray.

In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, cream the sugar, butter, and cream cheese on medium speed until light and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Add ½ cup of the caramel and beat until combined. Add eggs one at a time and beat well; add vanilla and beat until just combined.

Into a medium bowl, sift together the flour, baking powder, and salt. Add flour mixture to the sugar-egg mixture in 3 additions, alternating with milk and apple juice, and beginning and ending with flour. Mix until well combined after each addition. Stir in pecans.

Divide the batter evenly among the pans, smoothing it out with the back of a spoon. Bake for 30 minutes, turning the pans after 15 minutes, until the cakes start pulling away from the sides of the pans and a toothpick inserted into the center of the cakes comes out clean. Place a raised wire rack atop a section of newspaper or paper towels. Let the cakes cool slightly, then invert them onto the wire rack.

For the frosting:

In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, whip the butter and ¼ cup of cooled caramel until fully combined. Add confectioners' sugar and whip until smooth. Add vanilla and whip until fully combined.

To assemble:

With a serrated knife, trim off the rounded top of both cake layers. Invert each layer trimmed-side down onto the rack. Warm up 1 cup of caramel, and brush the top and sides of each cake layer; let the layers cool for 10 minutes.

Set 1 layer on a cake plate. Frost just the top of the layer, then add the second cake layer, again trimmed-side down, and generously frost just the top. Thinly cover the sides with frosting, smoothing it as much as possible with an offset spatula. Refrigerate cake for 20 minutes.

Slightly warm up 1 cup of the remaining caramel, and gently pour it over the top of the cake to cover, letting some stream down the sides (adding more if needed). Save any remaining caramel for another use.



RIVER OF ROO

©
*The author (right) and Bert Deener work the waters
of the Satilla River for redbreasts.*



A dramatic photograph of a river scene. Large, moss-covered tree trunks and hanging Spanish moss frame the top and sides of the image. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a dappled light effect. In the bottom left corner, a small boat with a person in a red shirt is visible on the water.

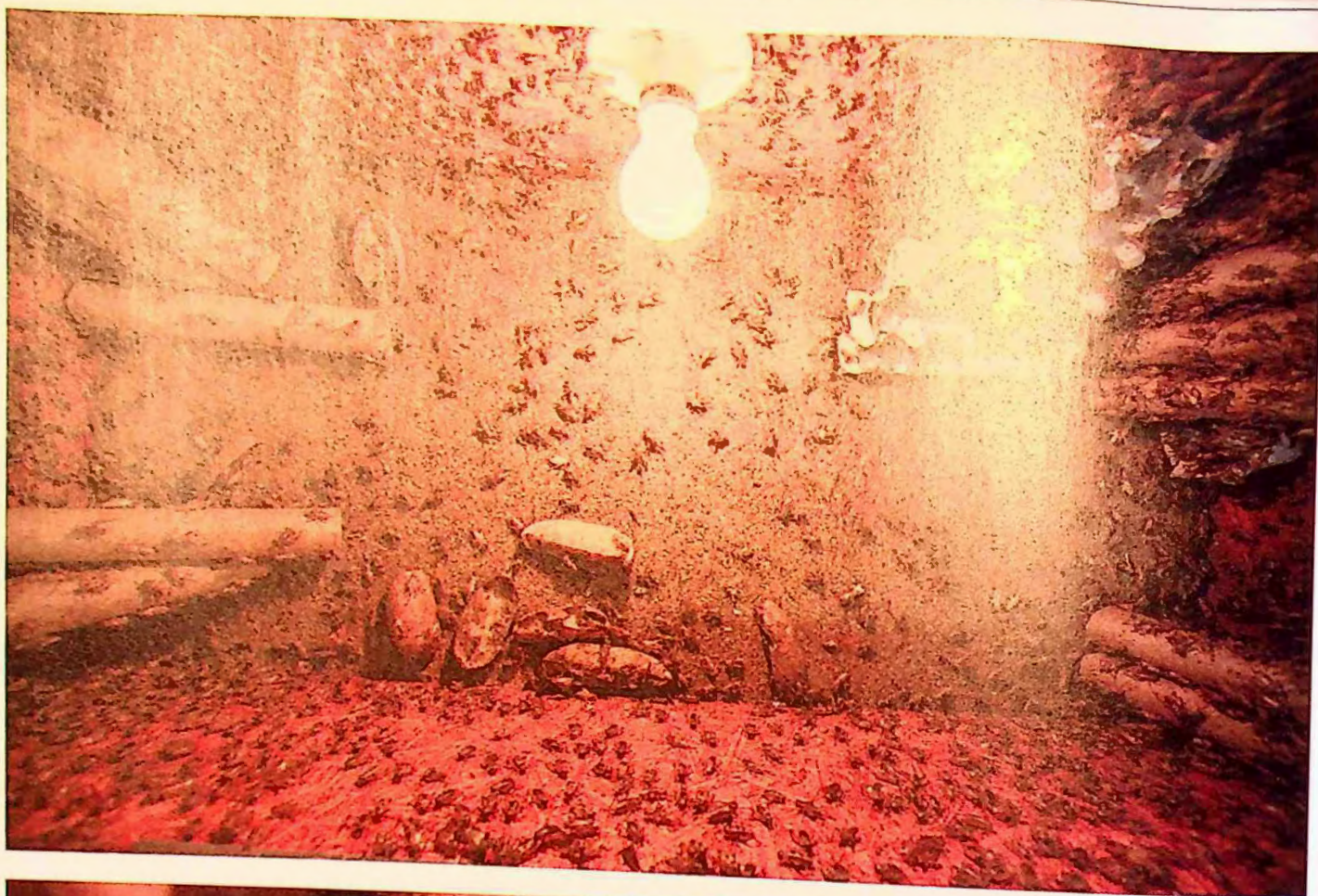
STERS

**DURING THE PEAK OF THE SUMMER REDBREAST
BITE IN GEORGIA, AN ENTIRE SUBCULTURE SPRINGS
UPON THE SHOULDERS OF A SMALL YET
PUGNACIOUS-AND STUNNINGLY BEAUTIFUL-FISH**

by T. Edward Nickens
photographs by Tim Romano

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AUGUST SEPTEMBER 2020
GARDEN&GUN





YOU'LL FIND THEM HAUNTING CREEK banks and dark river coves where blossoms of shadbush and wild blueberry swell through old cypress trees. That's where the fish flash like iridescent lightning. Redbreast sunfish live in places that call to childhood memory and sandbar naps. Until you hook one on a cricket or a curly-tailed grub. Then you don't think so much about how things used to be because you can feel the fight all the way down the rod and into the palms of your hands, and what you think about most is putting such a bellicose fish in the boat.

These fish sport a blue-green back and rays of turquoise around each eye. During the spring and summer spawn, the males take on a red hue so brilliant it gives them the nicknames "redbelly" or "robin" or "rooster red." Most prevalent in lower Piedmont and Coastal Plain rivers and creeks from Virginia to Mississippi, redbreast sunfish live in waters where the South's natural fabric is largely intact. They are the brook trout of the South's overlooked blackwater rivers and Piedmont creeks, the redfish of our cypress sloughs and bottomland forests.

This is a creature that ties human and natural history together in a region of the South that few explore. Up and down the South's redbreast rivers, old fish camps still hang on in the woods. Anglers thread trailers down sandy boat ramps to drop jon boats and canoes into the water. Jimmy Carter wrote of wading waist-deep on the sandbars of the Little Satilla River, his favorite redbreast fishing stream. It was "a remote and lonely site," he recalled, which led him to stay close to his father as they waded the dark waters.

"This little animal captures the vibe of what this ecosystem means to so many people," says Flint Riverkeeper Gordon Rogers, a son of the Georgia Coastal Plain soils. "It's a piece of flypaper that all of the emotion and memories and hopes of this landscape sort of grab on to."

Last summer I spent a week along Georgia's Satilla River, perhaps the center of redbreast fishing culture in the South. I fished with historic old fishing clubs and lure makers and scientists, and paddled and camped

on remote sandbars as white as a Bahamas beach. Undammed for its entire 235-mile journey across the state's Coastal Plain, the Satilla is a place where people work hard to keep the culture of redbreast fishing alive—and keep the natural state of this river intact.

And it's a region loaded with unforgettable characters. On my first morning in Georgia I stopped by Winge's Bait & Tackle, just outside downtown Waycross, to load up on gear and a fishing license. Richard "Dickie" Winge's father opened the store in 1954 in a bygone Gulf gas station across the street. It's been the region's go-to tackle shop ever since. There's a steady stream in and out of the shop on a weekday midafternoon. "You can tell it's getting right," Winge said, grinning. "Full moon last week, and this warm weather is doing it."

"It" is the fast and furious fishing of the redbreast spawn, and I loaded the checkout counter with popping bugs, hooks, and corks. Winge, however, wasn't convinced that an outsider had what it takes to compete on the Satilla. He walked me out to the front parking lot with an eleven-foot-long collapsible BreamBuster pole. "That rooster is just so ferocious when he hits," he told me, smacking his hands together for emphasis. "It will zip the line through the water, and you can hear it just a-singing while you're trying to hold on. But first we got to get you buggin'."

He pointed to a curb in the parking lot, and flicked a red popping bug up against the concrete. "That's the riverbank, see?" he explained. "And you got to get right next to it. Not four inches away from it. Next to it. That's where the big roosters live."

He whipped the rod overhead. "Look at how I snap this thing," he admonished. "And you'll have to sidearm it or you'll spend half the day picking your bugs out of the branches."

He handed me the twenty-two-dollar pole, and I thought about the three thousand dollars' worth of fly rods and fly reels stashed in my truck. I flicked the bug over my shoulder and snapped it forward just as a timely breeze picked up at the perfect moment to help me lay the bug not a half inch from the curb.

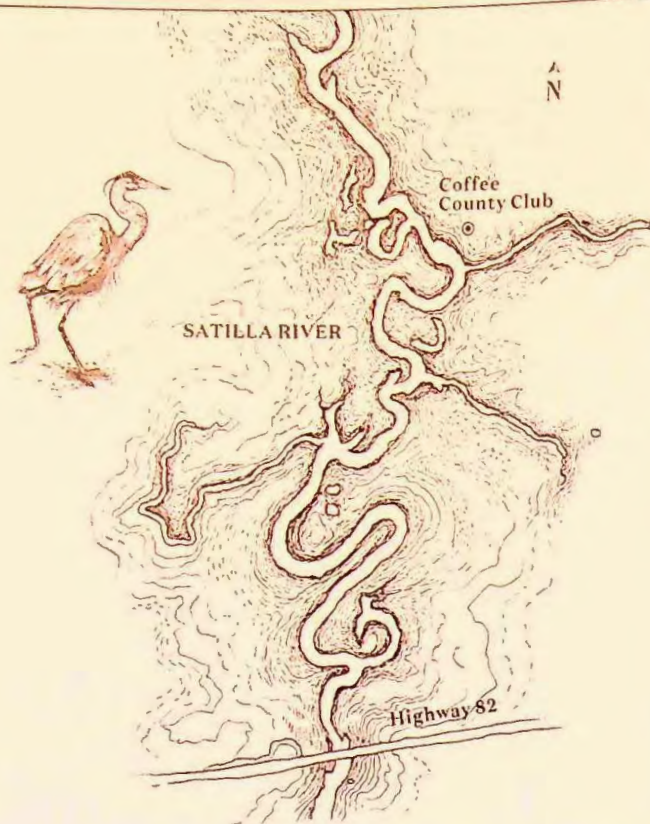
"Oh, yeah, boy," he said. "You gonna do just fine."

THE REDBREAST IS "A PIECE OF FLY-PAPER THAT ALL OF THE EMOTION AND MEMORIES AND HOPES OF THIS LANDSCAPE SORT OF GRAB ON TO"



© From left: Cruising on the river; Winge's Bait & Tackle; Richard "Dickie" Winge shows off a BreamBuster pole; a sign for the Waycross Fishing Club. Opposite: Crickets for sale at Winge's; a redbreast in hand.





LIKE MOST COASTAL PLAIN STREAMS, the Satilla River ecosystem is driven by late winter and early spring floods, which spread the river out into wide swampy floodplains where fish leave the river to feed on a smorgasbord of ants, crickets, worms, and small baitfish. When the water recedes, the fish return to the main river course, fattened by the nutrients of an entire riverine landscape.

"If you don't have high winter water, you won't have good fish," explained Bert Deener. Nor good fishing, and Deener is concerned equally with both. A fisheries biologist for Georgia's Department of Natural Resources, Deener is also the inventor of the Satilla Spin, one of the deadliest lures for redbreast, and the maker of an entire arsenal of other artificial baits.

In his jon boat one afternoon, on the Satilla River below Nahunta, Georgia, Deener played the trolling motor's foot pedal like a church organist, bumping the boat with little bursts of energy so it caught subtle river eddies to place him in a precise casting position. To watch Deener cast a spinning rod is to witness an elite athlete in peak form. He fired a small safety-pin spinner underhand, with a tight circular backcast to bring the rod tip low. The lure shot thirty feet across the black water, as straight as a missile. It slipped under an overhanging cypress branch with maybe two inches to spare, rocketed over a downed tree, then threaded a hole in the brush not half the size of a basketball to land in a cereal-bowl-sized clearing in the water. It was as skillful a cast as any I'd ever seen.

My casts weren't as on-target, but I still managed to put a Satilla Spin in the right place a few times. Deener and I traded fish. We pulled in piddling-sized red-



breasts, a small largemouth bass, a stumpknocker—the spotted sunfish, which hangs around submerged trees—and then suddenly Deener's rod bent double and the reel zinged as a serious fish took off for the dark timber.

"Oh, yes, come on in the boat!" Deener cried. "That might be what we're looking for."

The fish never gave up the fight, the rod plunging like a dowsing stick with every run, and when he brought the rooster out of the water, we all gasped at the brilliant red breast. It was a solid ten-inch fish. Bragging size if not large enough to get our names in the local paper.

"He might not be the boss of the river," Deener said. "But he was sure boss of that log."

We took a few photographs of the redbreast, and then I released it as if it were a wild native trout: I leaned far over the gunwale, cradled the fish in my hands, moving it gently back and forth to wash the river through its gills as it caught its breath. Deener watched from the back of the boat. "There aren't many prettier fish," he crooned. "I know fish. And there's just not."



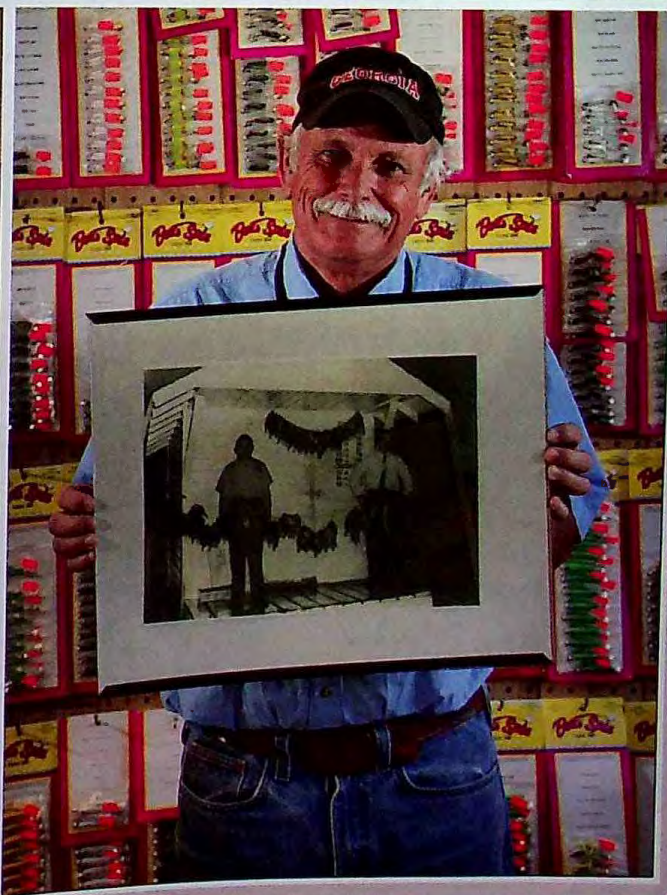
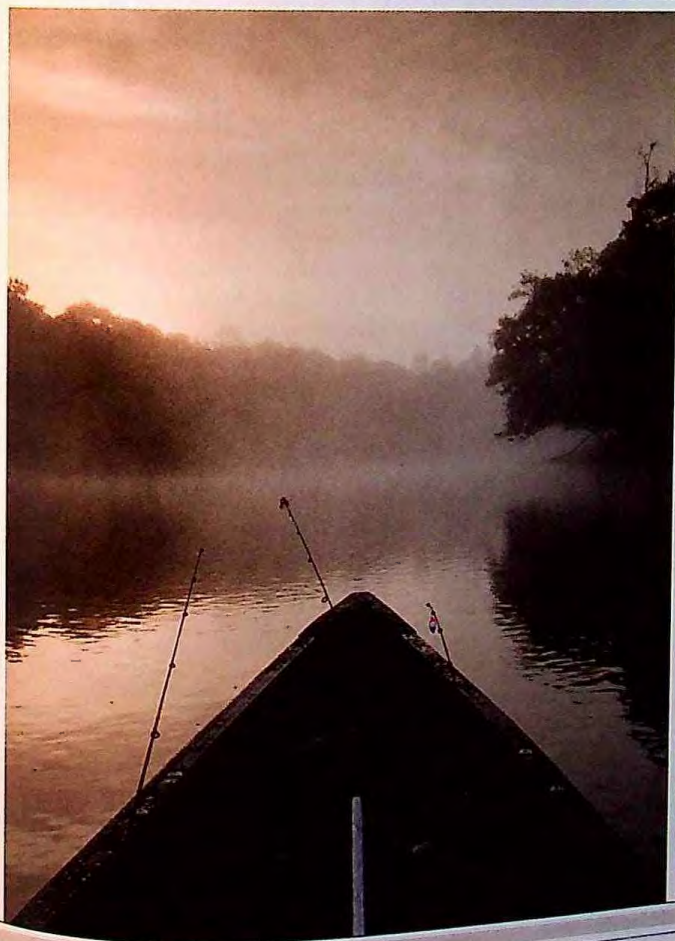
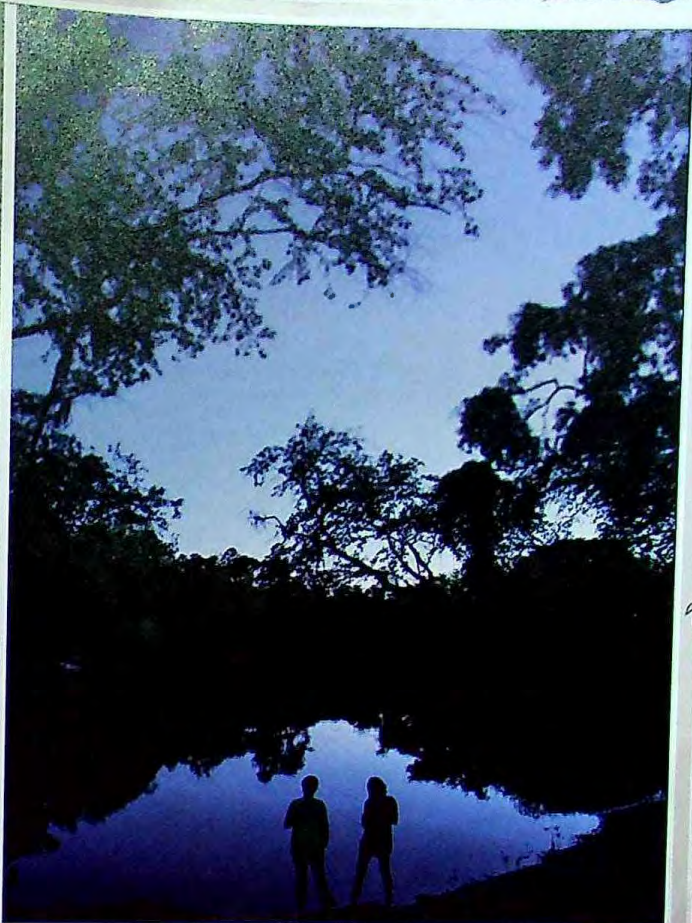
THE SATILLA WINDS THROUGH BIG timber and farm country and long stretches of low ground clad in cypress swamp. There's precious little public access, which helps explain the presence of the historic fishing clubs and camps that hide along its banks. Many have moldered into the tupelo gums and pine flats: Gone are Long Lake, Happy Hollow, Nimmers Camp, and Black-shear Fishing Club. But at least three other old-time fishing clubs still operate, and their decades of history reflect every cultural, social, and political aspect of the river's native redbreast sunfish.

One afternoon I met James "Jimmy" Stewart III at the Waycross Fishing Club, downstream of the Highway 52 bridge. The club was founded in 1917 on a strategic river bluff, about as far as folks from Waycross could drive, fish a bit, and then get home that same night. Memberships are handed down across generations. Waiting lists can be decades long. Among its members are the owners of the Waycross newspaper, local bankers, a large insurance family, and the founders of Red Lobster and Olive Garden.

Stewart sported a few days of salt-and-pepper beard stubble, eyes shaded with a camouflage sun visor and round eyeglasses that ride up his nose when he laughs,

© Lily, a Boykin spaniel, watches the action on the river. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Catch of the day; Shannon Bennett and Sherry Bowen on the banks of the Satilla; Winge at his store; the view from the bow on an early morning.





**THAT
SENSE OF
GRATITUDE—
OF FEELING
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TO HAVE
BEEN RAISED
ON A
REDBELLY
RIVER—WAS
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WITH
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IN SOUTH
GEORGIA**

©
From left: Deener
loads up; rocking
chairs at the Coffee
County Club; a young
angler with her
catch at the Atkinson
landing; casting in
tight quarters.

which is often. He's the third generation of leadership at Stewart Candy Company, which has grown from its 1922 roots as a maker of peppermint candies to a distributorship that fills the shelves of half the convenience stores in South Georgia. And he's the third generation to hold membership in the Waycross Fishing Club.

The clubhouse is perched on a high bluff overlooking Buffalo Creek, a dead-end slough off the main stem of the Satilla so wild and pristine that I half expected pterodactyls to fly through the woods with the pileated woodpeckers. It's nothing fancy, a sprawling low building with a massive great room and a widescreened porch overlooking the main attraction: a small-gauge two-track trolley with an open car that ferries anglers up and down the steep bluff. It was built around 1950 as trolling motors started replacing oars, and members tired of lugging heavy batteries up and down the hill.

Stewart and I clambered into the trolley for the ride to the boat dock, down a slope shaded with tall oaks. When he was growing up, he said, just about everyone fished from small one- and two-person flat-bottomed cypress boats. "And after fishing," he recalled, "we'd sink them in the shallows before we left. That's how we preserved them." The steep hill between the river and the clubhouse was once chockablock with cypress boats. These days, Stewart doesn't think there's a single one left on the river.

We motored upstream in Stewart's skiff to a place called Knox Suck. A "suck" is what locals call the river braids, the place where the river splits and divides into a dendritic watercourse. In a narrow suck, the river is smaller and more intimate. Stewart will fish the Satilla year-round, but for a solid month he'll follow the falling water of spring, fishing most days of each week as the river drains out of the surrounding swamps and cypress sloughs. "The joke around here," he said, "is that you know it's going to be a good redbreast year when the fish are eating acorns." In the suck it's easy to fire a cast from bank to bank, and we fished the eddy lines and deep, slow pools, pulling out redbreasts of every imaginable size. Stewart sorted them out in his South Georgia argot: "That's a butter bean," he explained of a fish that wouldn't cover half my hand. The next size up was a "potato chip." A big hen redbreast was a "Sally." Larger still was a "slab." When I hauled in a decent-sized spawning male, Stewart wolf-whistled. "The redbreast is the prettiest fish in the river," he announced. "A rooster'll look right down his nose at a catfish."

Stewart is a man of some means. He fishes offshore

blue water. He hunts big whitetails in Kansas. But by any measure, he seemed as happy as a man could be sitting in a canoe with a fussy motor, casting to a fish that might seem prosaic and commonplace.

There are two reasons for that, he told me. "First," he said, laughing, "it helps that these little fish get along right well with a skiff." But mostly, redbreast sunfish are homegrown trophies. They are just down the road, Stewart said. Within an afternoon's reach. "This is our game," he said, "and we get to play it in a place so wild and pretty that you just can't hardly believe that hardly no one knows it's even here."

That sense of gratitude—of feeling fortunate and blessed to have been raised on a redbelly river—was evident with nearly every person I spoke with in South Georgia. One morning I fished the Satilla with Chuck Sims, a second-generation undertaker from Ambrose County. In 1934, Sims's grandfather helped establish one of the river's venerable fishing institutions, the Coffee County Club. The main clubhouse was called the "lean-to," so named when the structure fell off a flatbed trailer and was simply left in place. "No woman alive would go in there," Sims said. "And that was kind of the point." The Coffee County Club has cleaned itself up a bit these days. Lots of younger people have moved mobile homes and small cottages to the communal landing. In the spring and summer, the river is thronged with anglers. For years, Sims ran an old Evinrude motor folks on the river called the "Skeeter Smoker." "Folks would holler out at me," he said, laughing, "Sims, get on over here! The yellow flies are about to eat us up!"

His current motor seemed to be from the same mold. It's an old twenty-five-horsepower Johnson that Sims rides hard. He grinds into sandbars and bumps over logs, bellowing to his guests and his craft like they are children playing in the front yard.

"You boys hold on!"

"Hang loose! I don't want to shear a pin!"

"Uh-oh. We're stuck."

Sims is an institution on the Satilla, but smoking motors aren't all he's known for. He spent eighteen years in the Georgia state legislature, from 1997 to 2015, and he's well remembered not only for his homespun delivery but for his passionate defense of the Satilla and other Georgia rivers. In 2010 he led an epic effort to ban all motorized vehicles—ATVs were the primary target—from riding river bottoms during low water. The machines decimated redbreast spawning habitat. "Getting that passed," he said, "was the start of a lot of good conservation work on these rivers."



At one point we tied up to a downed tree for what Sims called “young’un fishing”—long poles, a bobber, and a hook. The river was low, and clear enough to make out old elliptical depressions in the sandbar bottoms where redbreasts had built their spawning beds. “I’ve got a bird dog that’ll point a redbreast bed,” Sims said. “You can see her up there on the front of the boat, smelling those beds, and she knows it’s something, she just don’t know what it is.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“But I do,” he said.

The next afternoon I met two sisters whose family is nearly synonymous with Satilla River redbreast fishing. Shannon Bennett and Sherry Bowen were two of the three Strickland girls—their youngest sister, Stacia Fuller, completed the trio—who were fixtures on the Satilla in their growing-up years. Their grandparents ran the old Strickland’s Fish Camp, which had its own boat ramp, a few simple cabins, and a café where the cooks would fry your catch. Their father, A. J. Strickland, was a longtime Pierce County commissioner and champion of river conservation. “You’d never know who he was going to have in the boat with him,” Bennett recalled, “from the poorest to the wealthiest. Even the governor one time. If somebody wanted to go fishing, that’s all he cared about. Showing them his river.”

We were at the old Strickland river landing, under giant oak trees where the sisters had played on rope swings, watching a family fish from the sandy spit where all the Strickland girls were baptized. It’s here that local farm workers would bathe after priming tobacco, scrubbing with river sand and Ivory soap, and where local kids came to swim and play.

“I’ll tell you what this river did for us,” Bowen said. “We have turkey hunted on the banks, we have fished, we have hog hunted, and we did it all with whatever community was right here. Family, rich people, poor people, friends black and white, it didn’t matter. It was like this river was a bridge for all the people growing up around here.”

And redbreast sunfish provided a sort of elemental repast, a communion meal that washed away class and standing, lineage and pedigree.

“When people would pass,” Bennett said, “instead of bringing fried chicken or a casserole, Daddy would catch a mess of redbellies and show up at their door.” She paused for a moment to watch a young girl fight a fish that pulled at her fishing rod in deep, pulsing tugs. “Years and years later,” she said, “people would still tell us about Daddy bringing them fish and how much that ministered to their grief.”



SUCH SENTIMENTS—THAT A PAN-SIZED river fish could help transcend class and privilege, galvanize efforts to conserve, and function as a salve to the soul—helped fuel the last few days of my Satilla journey.

Like everyone I spoke with, I took to the water. For three days photographer Tim Romano and I paddled the river, fishing its sloughs and sucks and camping on sandbars with Gordon Rogers, who worked as the Satilla



Riverkeeper before he moved west to the Flint River.

On the second morning on the river, I draped my sleeping bag over a sunny willow tree and tried to talk myself into building a fire for eggs and sausage. The night before, we’d fried fish and cooked a smoke-infused ratatouille over a driftwood blaze, and a pile of leftover firewood beckoned. But the river unspooled along a low bar of sugar-white sand, a curve of clean beach and big woods, and I could hear fish feeding on the far bank. I saw one significant slurp, active and vigorous enough to leave paisleys of bubbles trailing in its wake. I watched as my stomach grumbled. A second slurpy take sealed the deal. I walked to the canoe, tipped out half my coffee, and pushed the boat in the water.

I arrowed the canoe across the current, ferrying upstream from the campsite. On the far side of the river the bank was a five-foot-tall vertical face of knotted roots and exposed white sand cliff, the water stitched with fallen and leaning trees that slowed and eddied and pooled the river in a crazy quilt of microcurrents. I slipped the canoe tight against the blowdowns, turned the bow downstream, and sculled the paddle with my left hand as I cast Dickie Winge’s buggin’ pole with my right.

It was a Tolkienesque world of deep shade, overhanging brush that scraped my shoulders, drooping branches, and dripping moss. I lifted the little popping bug, snapped it behind me, and dropped it into a swirl of melted caramel that unspooled into a calm slick behind a log.

I remembered Winge’s admonition to let the bug’s ripples flatten and fade before twitching the lure. I recalled Jimmy Stewart’s description of an old friend in an old wooden boat, gliding down the river in a fog so thick that it seemed like the man floated like a ghost over the water. And I thought of Chuck Sims with his dog on point in the bow of the boat, the musk of a redbreast spawning bed in his nostrils, the two of them staring intently into the copper water, one wondering what the smell could be and the other knowing that it was the scent of so many things that matter. **G**

© The author whips up a dinner of fresh fish and veggies on a Satilla River sandbar.





HAPPY AS A MUDLARK

Finding peace and pieces in Southern streams



reetings, fellow mudlarks! You of the boots or old tennis shoes (the ones you bought two summers ago, worn out already, sacrificial footwear) sinking deeper than you may have expected or hoped for into the ever-soft foreshore. But it's a bargain you make with the elements. Like everything else in this life, it's about how far you're willing to go—how dirty are you willing to get? The farther and dirtier the better: We mudlarks know this. Beachcombers are in our family tree, friendly relations, but they are not us. Those of you with no dirt beneath your fingernails, we pity you. ¶ And yet, this is interesting: Though you've been one off and on for most of your life, you may not even know it. You may not know what mudlarks really are. You may *never* have known that digging around in the mud looking for cool stuff had a name, that it was called something other than digging around in the mud looking for cool stuff. But everything has a name, and this thing we do is called

By
DANIEL WALLACE

Illustrations by
TIM TOMKINSON



mudlarking, a beautiful word for something that is essentially a muckfest, a deep dive into our silty past.

Mudlark. The magic of the word doesn't wane from repetition, but the beauty of it is deepened by its regrettable history. It's defined by the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* as "a person who scavenges for usable debris in the mud of a river or harbour." It's a term that was coined in the latter part of the eighteenth century, in London, describing those who scratched around on the shores of the River Thames. The Thames is a tidal river. It rises and falls by up to twenty-four feet a day. And every day on its shore—the foreshore, it's called, the part of the shore between the high and low water marks—something is seen that wasn't seen before. Two hundred years ago in London, the children (most mudlarks were children, or robust older women) took to the water's edge at low tide hoping to find something, anything, they could sell. By the late nineteenth century, there were almost three hundred of them, scrounging for a living in the river's muck. Lumps of coal, rope, bones, iron, copper. The children hauled their catch up to the street and sold it for whatever they could get. But there were also incredible treasures to be found: Bronze Age swords, shields, rapiers, Roman coins.

To this day, every day, the tide reveals new ancient things: Mesolithic flints, fragments of bricks and roofing tiles from the Middle Ages, Victorian pottery sherds (not a typo: fancy archaeologists use *sherds* when referring to broken bits of old pottery, and *shards* for everything else, like glass, metal, and bone), buttons and handmade marbles, and clay pipes from the 1600s to the early 1800s. The clay pipes were used to smoke tobacco from the New World. They were often sold already filled with tobacco, and once it was consumed, and the pipes themselves burned away with it, they were discarded. Finding these things among the stones that disguise them, it's impossible not to realize that you are the first person to touch them in hundreds, sometimes thousands of years—Western civilization has been using the Thames as a dumping ground for over two millennia. (*Mudlark*, by Lara Maiklem, is required reading for those who want to know more.)

The Thames is like a museum that only opens at low tide. It's a museum of the day-to-day lives of the people who were here—right here on this river—before we were. To mudlark along the Thames now, you need a license. You need to belong to a special club, which is very particular.



But the Thames is not the only place you find mudlarks. There are other rivers.

Back in the late sixties, when I was ten years old, I was a mudlark. There was a stream at the bottom of a shallow ravine behind my best friend Jamie's house, just outside of Birmingham, Alabama. I don't know where it came from—what larger

entity—or even remember wondering. It was just there, a stream that began in one place and ended in another and part of it went through his backyard. It was so narrow you could jump it without having to think about it twice. But this stream (rivulet, runnel, rill—so many great names for tiny rivers) could be anywhere, trickling in the shadows beneath an army of pine trees and oak. There were places where a backlog of sticks slowed the current and created small pools of water. You could see to the bottom and the fine sandy granules of dirt. We would spend large amounts of time here, by this stream. Much of it was spent picking up rocks and seeing what was beneath them: crawdaddies, salamanders, frogs, tadpoles. But kneeling in the mud you could find other things too. Just as it was on the edges of the Thames, in Jamie's backyard we found glass. Old soda bottles, and the insulators from the top of electrical poles that looked like abandoned parts of alien spacecraft. Lodged between the river rocks were smaller pieces of glass, in the deepest hues of green and blue, small shards worn down until their edges were as soft as a wedding ring. I remember finding an old fork there once, tines bent and burned as if in a campfire; I found some old coins—Lincoln wheat pennies from before I was even born—and a bird's bleached bones. I also found rusty metal license plates buried in the mud or hidden beneath a pile of leaves. This was a mystery to me. How did a license plate, which was made of metal, and the length and width of a shoebox, get down here? Could it have floated in on a tide during a rainstorm when this stream became a baby river? Or was this wooded ravine a place where people came to disappear? To change their old lives by getting rid of everything that marked them as who they were? They gathered around a campfire, eating beans with this fork, playing card games with pennies, and in the morning set out into the world, never to be seen here again.

There are stories in objects, in the most random things, and this is when you know you're a mudlark, when you see them.

Beachcombing is what mudlarks do on vacation. We have seen them walking back and forth just beyond the breaking waves as we watch from the deck nursing our first cup of coffee, or second mojito. Most beachcombers are just hoping for a pretty shell or two, a souvenir to remind them of where they went last July. But shells that look pretty glittering wet in the burning sun fade into dullness by the time they get home. Truly, there is not a lot the average surfy beach reveals. Of course, that doesn't keep your

uncle from looking, the one with the metal detector and air-traffic-controller headphones, hoping to find a gold Timex, or maybe half a pair of earrings. No real story there, though. Something was lost and now it's found. No mystery.

Mudlarking is not about discovery but about liberation, because most of what a mudlark finds was never lost, it was given to the water by its owner deliberately; finding it gives it back the life it lost when its owner was done with it. Mudlarks only find what the river wants to give them.

Serendipitous happenstance is enough sometimes. Or simple beauty. But soon you'll want context. It's no longer simply *What is this?* but *Why is this? Why is this here?* An aimless walk along the banks when you see something unnatural in nature. Shards of the past from a broken bottle, or something that just might be an arrowhead, and your eyes home in on the space around your feet. Mudlarks call this "getting your eyes in."

Some of the best mudlarking is done among remnants from earlier centuries. In Charleston, South Carolina, there's a slip of sand along the Battery where people dumped trash in the early nineteenth century. Just strolling along near there, you can find a lot of ceramic fragments, like Mocha ware or china. Everyone had Mocha ware back in the nineteenth century because it was so cheap, and when it broke, they'd just throw it out. Now it's amazingly expensive. But find a piece of Mocha ware in Charleston and you have to wonder how it got here. It wasn't made here. It was shipped here from England, and some early Americans ate their supper on it. One of the kids came hurtling through the dining room and slammed against the table, busting the dinner plates. Into the harbor they went. It's just a story. It's storytelling through objects. You might find it on your lunch break, pick it up—the first person to touch it in a hundred years. The first person since it was unceremoniously tossed.

The electric thrill of that touch is addictive. True mudlarks can't stop. It's as if they're trying to reassemble the world.

The globally renowned self-taught artist Butch Anthony has been a mudlark almost all of his peripatetic life. He lives in the unincorporated community of Seale, Alabama, not far from the Georgia state line, and about two and a half hours from where I grew up in Birmingham. When he was fourteen, he dug up a vertebra from a mosasaur, a seventy-million-year-old fifty-foot-long lizard; now, though near half a century has passed, he has not slowed

down a bit. But it's not about extinct reptiles anymore, it's about his art. On the Chattahoochee River, near Columbus, Georgia, sandbanks appear when the river dries up, spangled with all sorts of things, mostly glass, old bottles especially: Columbus opened a Coca-Cola bottling plant in 1902.

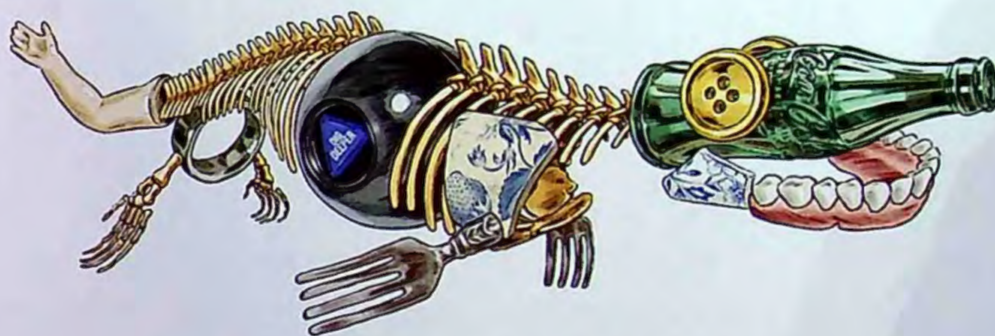
"There's a bridge there, and everyone has been throwing their stuff off of it for a long time," he says. He spots things around the bridge and in the water—whatever beautiful refuse finds its way to the surface. He calls his signature style Intertwangelism, a word he made up that describes his way of assembling art, design, and objects from nature. To him, inter = to mix, twangle = a distinctive way of speaking, thinking, behaving, and ism = a theory.

Storytelling is central to Anthony's work. And it's a magical restoration of sorts: finding something once considered functional, and turning it into something that is proudly *not*, an art that exists for its own sake, a collaboration with an unnamed teenager

ashtrays, which we threw into Chesapeake Bay, make somebody's day? I will hazard this answer: When enough time has passed that the object has a secret, a story to tell, one that we may never know the particulars of, but one you can happily spend a few moments imagining. That's the difference between today's mudlarks and the world's more common scavengers: dumpster divers, junkmen, waste pickers, grubbers. There is almost no monetary value in what a mudlark finds; almost none of what they find is *whole*. Joy comes from finding a *piece* of something: a piece of brick, of a pipe, of a plate. A fork with bent tines. These are clues, clues pointing toward a larger mystery.

That larger mystery is us.

All of us are mudlarks, forever digging into the mucky and murky past for remnants of who we were, in the hopes that by bringing these small broken parts of ourselves into the light, we'll understand the greater whole. And maybe we'll learn to be




JOY COMES FROM FINDING A *PIECE* OF SOMETHING: A PIECE OF BRICK, OF A PIPE, OF A PLATE. THESE ARE CLUES, CLUES POINTING TOWARD A LARGER MYSTERY

from 1953, throwing back the last of his cola and thoughtlessly dropping the bottle into the Chattahoochee.

No matter who they are or where they're doing it, mudlarks are treasure seekers, but their treasure is, literally, the trash of other people long dead. And this leads to questions: What is the process by which rubbish attains value? How much time has to pass before, say, a zirconium wedding ring or a set of false teeth or a Magic 8-Ball becomes a prize? Some serious scavengers dig up outhouses and seek out antebellum rat nests, rats being great collectors themselves. When will my father's

as careful about the things we throw away as we are about the things we keep.

Water subsumes and reveals us. We will find more of the old world as waters recede in coming droughts, and lose more of the new world as glaciers melt, pouring into and over our coastal towns and cities, setting the table for future mudlarks farther inland. And all of our future selves will wonder who we really were to have done what we did. Think of what we've had and lost, carelessly disposed of, and of the young just now being born who will go out looking for it all, and tell stories about what they find. □

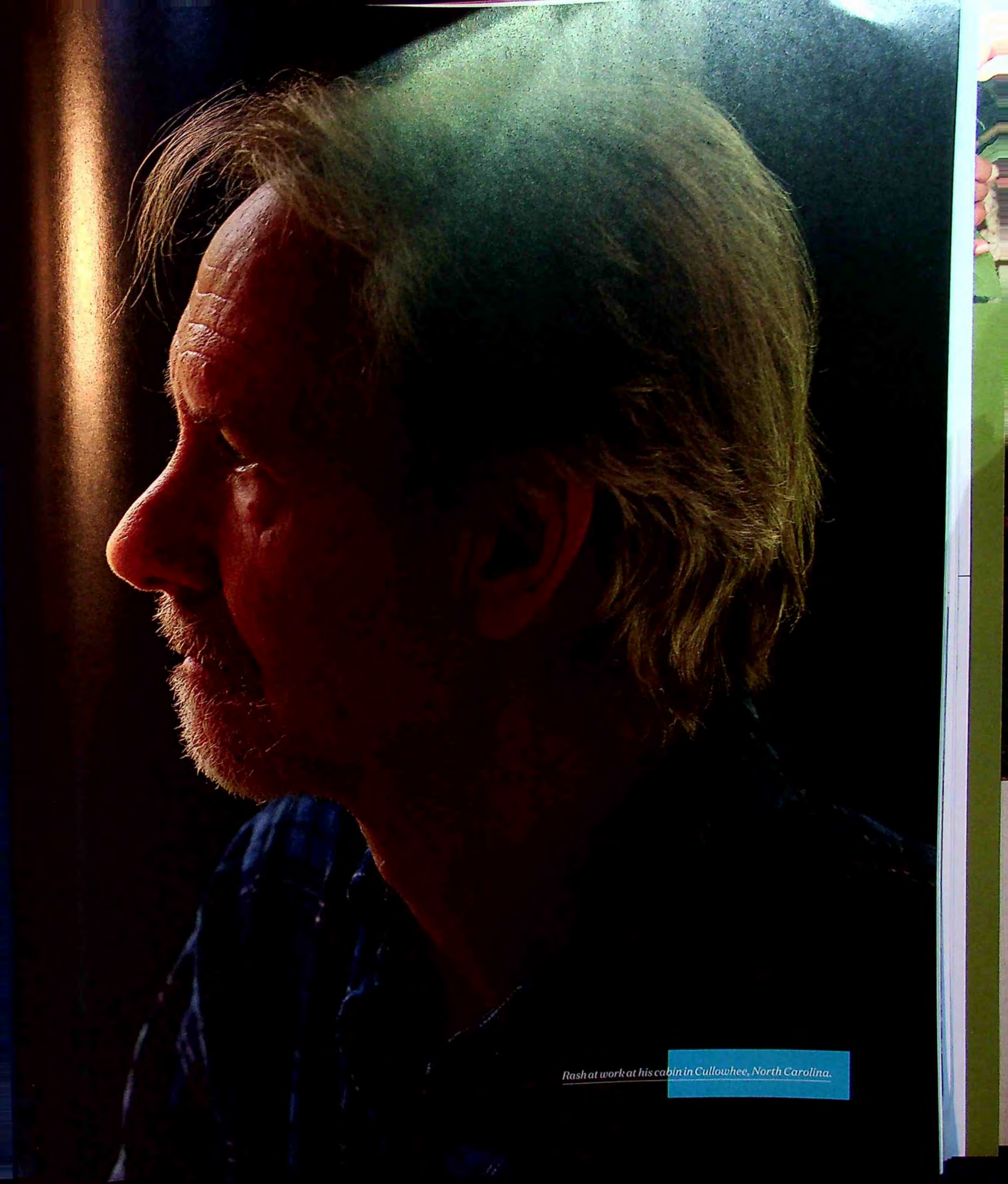


THE BLUE- COLLAR BARD

Poet,
short story writer,
novelist—

Ron Rash reflects his workaday Appalachian roots in his writing, including a new novella that returns to the antihero of his best-selling *Serena*

: by **Bronwen Dickey** photographs by **Daniel Dent**



Rash at work at his cabin in Cullowhee, North Carolina.

"I'VE NEVER HAD MUCH OF A SOCIAL LIFE."

the poet and fiction writer Ron Rash admitted on a video call one day last spring. He had just returned from fishing for brook trout near his home in upstate South Carolina, and he was pleased to have caught one, as well as a snake he came across in the woods: a black racer. His wife, Ann, crossed the frame with a knowing shrug.

In a parallel universe, Rash would have been preparing for a book tour to promote his latest collection of stories and a novella, *In the Valley*, or traveling between Clemson and his other home in Cullowhee, North Carolina, where he teaches fiction writing at Western Carolina University. But the world had instead mostly ground to a halt.

Rash, though, has built his life around long stretches of solitude, so his daily rit-

uals went on as they have for almost forty years. First comes forty-five minutes of reading while working out on an elliptical machine. "It opens me up, to get the endorphins going," he says. Now that he is sixty-six, his knees can no longer handle the strain of running the eight hundred meters, much less in the blistering 1:53 he did in college, or the ten- and twelve-mile jogs that used to clear his head, but for Rash, sweating and writing are twin engines. One doesn't work well without the other.

Once his workout is complete, he typically spends three or four hours scratching away at a legal pad with a freshly sharpened pencil. He doesn't trust the smooth, uniform look of his sentences on a computer screen, at least not at first. Using paper and pencil feels more intimate, more like real physical work. When he needs a boost, he reaches for a glass of unsweetened iced tea, and can polish off forty-eight ounces of it before finally putting the manuscript away.

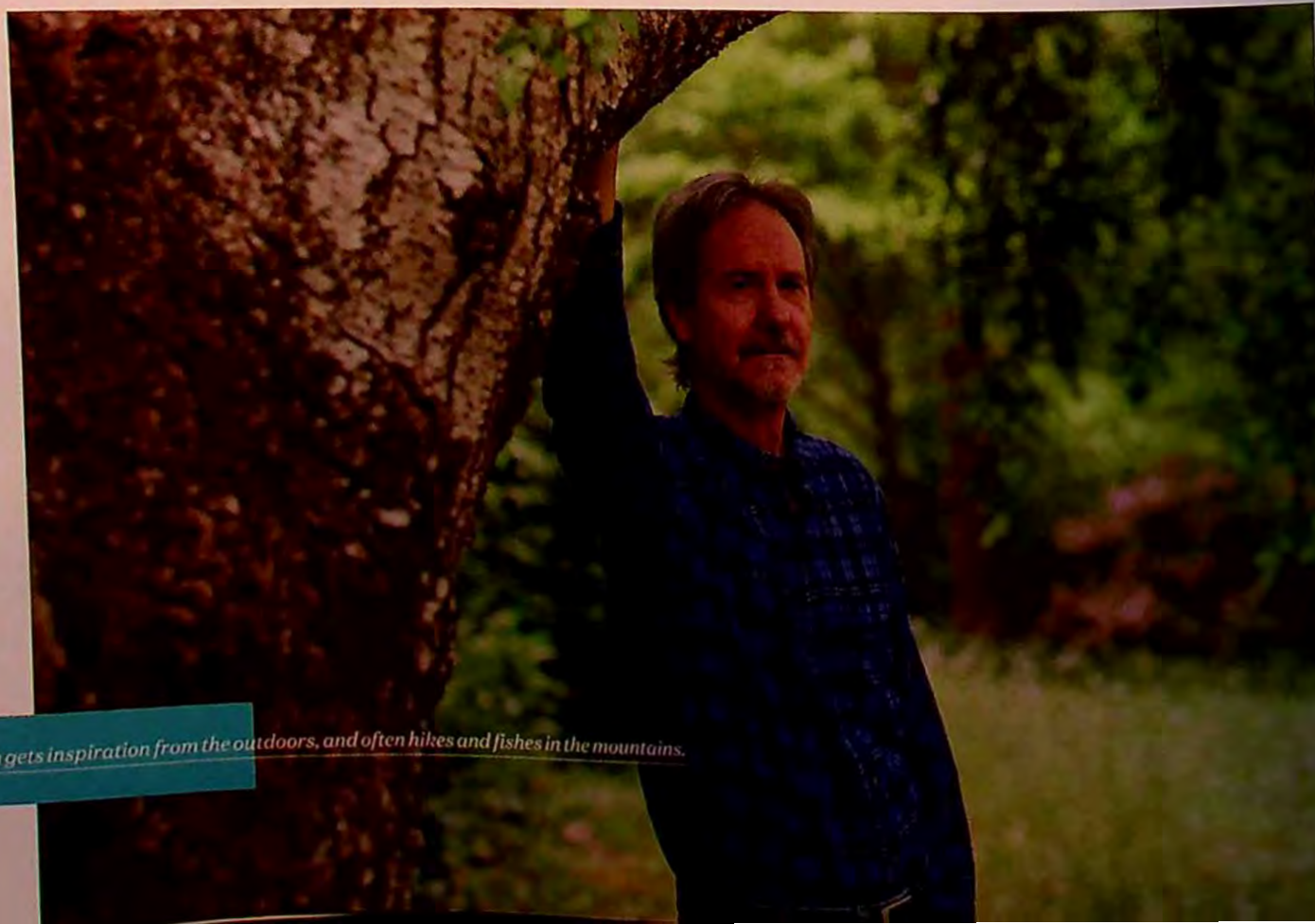
I first met Ron in 2007 when we spoke on a panel together at the University of South Carolina. Then, as now, he was lanky, slightly grizzled, and thoroughly unpretentious, possessed of both a quiet intensity and a warm, self-deprecating sense of humor. His strong mountain accent rounded "writer" into "rider," giving the trade a slight heroic tenor, and his riffs on world literature—Yeats, Marlowe, Australian fiction—exuded both wisdom and passion. Was my first name, he asked, a reference to the series of

early Welsh myths, the *Mabinogion*? Sadly, no, but his query inspired me to seek it out.

What struck me most was his unwavering commitment to the daily act of writing. Many writers claim to work every day, but I can count on three fingers the ones I know who actually do. Rash is more disciplined than any, writing six days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. Like Dale, the aging dock builder in one of his new stories, he focuses more on process than results: "Even if they never notice," Dale tells his impatient son, "it has to be done right." Faced with clumsy first efforts, stalled drafts, and painful rejections, Rash has maintained a stubborn, even irrational belief that if he sits with a story long enough, he might approach that vanishing horizon some call transcendence. "The days you'd rather stick pencils in your eyes than write," he says, "are the days that'll make you a writer."

That tenacity has yielded a wide-ranging body of work—seven novels, seven books of short stories, six books of poems, two anthologies, and a children's book over the past twenty-six years—all set in the deep folds of Southern Appalachia. *In the Valley* includes Rash's first novella, which continues the saga of Serena Pemberton, the ruthless logging magnate from his 2008 best-selling novel, *Serena*.

Though Rash doesn't write to please critics, they sure seem to like him. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* considers him "one of the great American authors at



Rash gets inspiration from the outdoors, and often hikes and fishes in the mountains.

work today," and she is not alone. He has received the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, a Sherwood Anderson Prize, two O. Henry Prizes, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, among almost twenty other awards and distinctions.

But it hasn't been an easy glide to the top of Mount Parnassus, and that is where the tenacity comes in. Oddly enough, he didn't always have it.

THE OLDEST OF THREE SIBLINGS GROWING up in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, Rash did not start out as a promising student. Unless he was reading or roaming the woods around his grandmother's house near Boone, he found it difficult to focus. ("I'm the *least* well-rounded person," he says. "If I'm not interested in something, I can't fake it.") He failed the sixth grade, which, he notes dryly, "in North Carolina at that time was pretty hard to do." He almost failed high school biology, too, preferring to spend his time in shop class.

At the same time, Rash knew how much his parents valued education. James and Sue Rash met in the early 1950s while working at a cotton mill in Chester, South Carolina, and both went back to school as adults—Rash's father rode a bus all the way down to Columbia to take night classes—in order to give their children opportunities they never had. James went on to teach visual art at what is now Gardner-Webb University, inspiring Rash's lifelong fascination with painters and painting (his middle name is Vincent, after Van Gogh).

When Rash was in high school, his father was hospitalized for depression, an illness that tormented him for years. Sue Rash was left alone to look after three children in a small Southern town, one that often felt to her eldest son like its own dwarf planet. But when the family needed support from their neighbors, they got it. "The whole town helped us," Ron says. "It was a struggle that was never spoken of, but they knew. And people came through for us."

Rash learned to center himself by running. Unlike baseball, which he played as a boy, or basketball, which he loved but never mastered, running was a solitary, meditative pursuit that honed a level of focus nothing else could touch. It required no equipment. He could do it anywhere. Most important, it was a sport made of rhythms: breaths, footsteps, heartbeats. Loops, laps, splits. The event he ultimately settled into, the eight hundred meters, is notori-

ously difficult; it's too long for a sprint and too short for long-distance pacing. The gangly Rash seemed to have been born for it, and his skill as a runner soon earned him a scholarship to Brevard College. The more he ran, the more addicted he became to the rare moments when the training took over and he floated free of himself, feeling stronger and faster than he'd ever been.

When he wasn't in school or at the track, Rash escaped to the mountains of Watauga County, where his uncles taught him to hunt and fish and bale hay on their neighbor's farm. He also began reading more intensely, beyond his boyhood favorites of Jack London and Mark Twain or the eerie shadowlands of Edgar Allan Poe. At fourteen, he discovered Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the first book that truly shook something loose inside him. During the famous scene in which the young Ras-kolnikov murders the pawnbroker, Rash felt utterly transported, almost possessed. "I had always entered the book," he says, "but it felt like that book entered me."

Rash didn't attempt any serious writing of his own until he was an undergraduate English major at Gardner-Webb, where he transferred after a year at Brevard. Encouraged by an attentive professor, he drafted his first short story, "Turtle Meat," about a man who used a snapping turtle to find the corpses of people who had drowned. The story won a fifty-dollar prize in a county writing contest, which inspired him to write more stories and try new forms. He fell in love with the rhythmic freedom of poetry, "the sounds of words rubbing together," especially the work of Seamus Heaney and Dylan Thomas (who, Rash points out, was also a runner). Language could do so much more than simply convey information; it could reach inside of you the way a Doc Watson or an Earl Scruggs record could, strumming "three chords and the truth." Poetry was music, and that music held him tight.

Rash's first poem took him into deeper, more personal waters. It recalled an afternoon of fishing with his uncle Earl, a hard drinker with a wild past who once put on a football helmet and wrestled an orangutan at the county fair. Earl was patient and kind with his young nephew, eager to teach him how to read the land while stressing the value of hard work. He embodied many of the qualities found in Rash's resilient blue-collar characters, who are sometimes faced with impossible choices—what Edith Wharton once called "the hard considerations of the poor"—but whose fundamental decency isn't predicated on perfection. When Rash speaks of Earl now, the words catch in his throat. "I just wanted to give

him something," Rash says of the poem, which he lost years ago. "The people who stood by me have made what I do possible."

Rash continued to write while pursuing his master's in English at Clemson University and devouring much of the Western canon, from *Beowulf* to James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty. He favored authors who used the culture and customs of a single place (be it the real Dublin, Ireland, or the "apocryphal" Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi) to express the universal. He likens this to drilling for water: The bit enters the earth at one small point, but it is searching for a large, flowing current. The writers who fail to do that, who perpetuate old tropes and play up the exotic for its own sake, are doomed to languish in the bargain basement he calls "regional color." In the best of Southern literature Rash found voices who endured not because their worlds were narrow—he still cringes at the stereotype of the "unlettered country genius"—but because they were vast: Faulkner read Dickens and Balzac, Welty drew from Mann and Yeats. Storytelling was an act of inspired cross-pollination. And in capable, compassionate hands, the South became a window, not a cage.

R

RASH'S TIME AT CLEMSON CHANGED HIS life in two distinct and divergent ways. The first involved a chance meeting with a fellow student in the master's program, Ann Todd. Standing only five foot two, Ann sat on a dictionary when she typed, and Rash needed her by asking if she was trying to learn new words by osmosis. ("A lot of people would not have thought that was funny," Rash says, "but she did.") Six years later, the two were married, and soon had a daughter, Caroline, and a son, James.

The second event was a workshop held by a Famous Writer whom Rash greatly admired at the time, but whose name he'd rather not disclose. Rash signed up for the afternoon session hoping for guidance on a short story he knew didn't yet work. Instead of offering that guidance, the Famous Writer eviscerated Rash in front of his friends and teachers, taking great pains to chart every grim coordinate of the story's awfulness. Red-faced, the humiliated Rash returned to his shared office and sat alone in the dark, staring at the walls. After fifteen minutes of gazing into the abyss, Rash summoned up the "weird little knot of confidence" that always tightened when

someone wrote him off. "Okay," he told himself. "This is the way it's gonna be. There'll be people that do this. It'll probably happen again, so are you gonna let this stop you? Or are you gonna become better?"

The sting of that rebuke hasn't entirely disappeared, even decades later, but Rash now believes the writer did him a favor. Until then, he hadn't realized just how serious he was about his writing and how hard he was willing to work to improve it, regardless of who liked it—or didn't.

Rash moved forward, revising his work regularly, but not religiously, after he and Ann were married. Sometimes, though, there simply wasn't enough time to focus on creative projects; the list of his responsibilities as a husband, father, teacher, and friend edged them out. Much as he regretted that, he accepted it as inevitable.

That changed in 1980, when Rash's father died at the age of fifty-six. Rash was then twenty-eight, and the sudden loss triggered a radical reappraisal of his priorities. *Do I really want to live my life, he thought, not knowing if I could do this, if I could be*

a writer? Committing to that path would mean training for it: stripping his life down to its barest elements and getting rid of anything that did not involve his wife, his kids, or his job. It would also mean staring down years of potential failure and disappointment. But time, he realized, was not an infinitely renewable resource. He would rather try and fail than never know.

F

FOR ALMOST TWENTY YEARS AFTERWARD, Rash wrote almost every day with no assurance that anyone would ever read his work. He woke early in the morning and wrote before teaching a full load of classes, first at a local high school, then at a technical college. He didn't socialize, didn't travel. When his young children wanted to go to the park, he wrote on the picnic table at the playground. He wrote on weekends, he wrote on holidays. It was not uncom-

mon for him to take a piece through fifteen drafts—or more—before finally sending it off to a magazine or literary journal.

Rash worked in all forms, using poetry to experiment with rhythms while distilling his prose into taut, muscular portraits of mountain life. In both, he started with a visual image (a farmer standing in a field, for example, or a fish dying in a stream), then wrote toward it, chipping away at a draft's wall of words until that image came to life. Again and again, he returned to the places that haunted him, such as the Jocassee Valley in upstate South Carolina, which was flooded for hydroelectric power in the early 1970s, and the Shelton Laurel Valley in Western North Carolina, where Confederate soldiers executed thirteen Union sympathizers in 1863.

Every poem, every story, was an attempt to honor the beautiful, troubled, often contradictory and violent world of Southern Appalachia without blurring its edges. As his close friend, the novelist Steve Yarbrough, puts it, "Ron's determination as a fiction writer seems to be: never, ever to

The Ron Rash Reader

The AUTHOR'S NEW COLLECTION, ALONG with FOUR OTHER ESSENTIAL BOOKS



One Foot in Eden
(2002)

Set in the Jocassee Valley of upstate South Carolina during the 1950s, Rash's elegiac first novel begins when a local troublemaker goes missing. The sheriff suspects he has been murdered, but without a body, he can't prove it. The voices of five narrators—the sheriff, a farmer, his wife, their son, and the sheriff's deputy—drive the story forward, with the final line of the book dropping like a hammer in the heart.



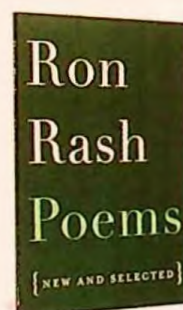
Serena
(2008)

Rash's fourth novel, which takes place in a Depression-era North Carolina logging camp, centers on a timber baron named George Pemberton and his mysterious new wife, Serena, who far outmatches her husband in ambition, cunning, and ruthlessness. As the couple make plans to expand their empire across the Smoky Mountains, George realizes that Serena's appetites are not just aggressive, they're deadly. Rash considers *Serena* "the best novel I ever wrote."



Burning Bright
(2010)

The characters in these twelve stories are haunted by forces they can't control and often don't fully understand: illness, poverty, addiction, violence, the scars of the Civil War, the myth of jaguars in the Carolinas. All must contend with a rural landscape changing faster than they want it to. "Hard Times," "Lincolnton," and "Burning Bright" are especially poignant. Winner of the 2010 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award.



Poems: New and Selected
(2016)

Spanning Rash's career up to 2016, this volume highlights the best of his four previous poetry collections while offering eight new pieces, making it an excellent introductory volume. Readers of his fiction will recognize the barns, graveyards, gorges, mill towns, and trout streams woven into the author's longer works but will see those places in a new and wholly original way.



In the Valley
(2020)

Rash's most recent book of short fiction includes the author's first novella, in which he envisions a new venture for Serena Pemberton, who has recently returned to Western North Carolina from Brazil. This time, however, the story's real focus is on the plight of the loggers, who, in a nod to Shakespeare, speak in iambic pentameter. The short stories "Neighbors" and "L'homme Blessé" are two other standout selections.

call attention to Ron Rash, and to keep the focus always on the lives of the characters. He knows the area he writes about inside and out. You can feel the love he has for the landscape, and for the people who inhabit the landscape." At times Rash's understanding of those characters required a careful alchemy of research and something just shy of Method acting. He pored over history books and interviewed old-timers, but the breakthroughs came from hands-on experience. He once sat in a forest for hours, inspecting trees, to figure out how his protagonist would hide a body. To grasp the physical sensations of drowning, he held his breath at the bottom of a pool.

Having amassed a stack of rejections by the mid-1990s, Rash cherished every triumph, and soon he'd accumulated enough of them to publish three collections of poetry and short stories with small presses. Eager to learn from fellow craftsmen, he nurtured friendships with writers he esteemed, such as William Gay, Lee Smith, Robert Morgan, and George Singleton. Still, he struggled to find a larger audience, and he wasn't quite sure how, or if, he could paint on a larger canvas. He threw away two finished novels that he felt were too forced, too plotted, too deadened by the top-down mandates of an outline. He did not publish his first novel, *One Foot in Eden*, until 2002. He was forty-nine.

Were the narrative of Rash's life split into three tidy acts, the success of his first novel after such a long, hard-won apprenticeship would mark the satisfying conclusion. Except that it wasn't. Despite getting a flurry of positive reviews and winning three literary prizes, the book didn't sell the way the publisher hoped, and neither did his next one, *Saints at the River* (2004), which won three more prizes, or the third, *The World Made Straight* (2006). All three novels explored the ways in which rural Appalachia has been both shaped and destroyed by people at war with the land, and in some cases, at war with one another: the flooding of mountain valleys, the battle over wild rivers, the slow creep of the drudgeconomy into desperate communities. The conflict between humans and their environment is not a regional concern, and these were not "Southern" stories; they were, and are, American stories that happened to occur in the South. But, unfortunately for Rash and many other artists, the rest of the country doesn't always see it that way.

In 2007, Rash finished his fourth and most ambitious novel, a dark, sweeping Shakespearean epic set in a North Carolina logging camp during the Great Depression. Nearly a dozen publishers passed on it before the manuscript finally landed with

Lee Boudreaux at Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins. Boudreaux was floored by the novel's brilliant female villain, Serena, who sends a swarm of loggers gnawing across the Smoky Mountains like carpenter ants just as Horace Kephart is campaigning for a national park. The story's chorus of minor characters gave it the depth and ballast of a Renaissance play, with the loggers caught between feeding their families and gutting the land that supports them. "It was propulsive," Boudreaux recalls of the book, which struck her as both timeless and timely, a fiery critique of capitalism

novel-length sequel. ("That's too much like *Ghostbusters* part two," he says.) He set out to work in a new form, the novella, and bring forward the voices of the loggers, specifically the character of Ross. After reading the manuscript, Boudreaux felt Rash had lingered too long on one of the female leads and encouraged him to focus on the "spooky" scenes he had written of the loggers hauling timber out of the fog. For the next pass, he'd added brief, lyrical interludes, told from the perspective of the animals fleeing the valley as it was logged, which widened the story's aperture into

EVERY POEM, EVERY STORY, WAS AN ATTEMPT TO HONOR THE BEAUTIFUL, TROUBLED, OFTEN CONTRADICTIONARY AND VIOLENT WORLD OF SOUTHERN APPALACHIA


run amok. She recognized the strong voices of the rural South she remembered from growing up in the Northern Neck of Virginia, and she saw parallels to the environmental clashes in other parts of the country, like the Pacific Northwest. "You're so vividly in the landscape with every word Ron uses about the land and with every piece of dialogue," she says. "You feel like these people have sprung to life in front of you."

Championed by the independent booksellers Rash had befriended, *Serena* went on to become a *New York Times* best seller and a finalist for the 2009 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction before being made into a 2014 film starring Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence. It also renewed interest in Rash's earlier work, with *The World Made Straight* adapted for the screen in 2015. Around the same time, Rash received numerous prizes for his short fiction, published his first story in the *New Yorker*, and won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2017.

Rash and Boudreaux worked on two more books before she left HarperCollins, and then reunited for his new book published by Doubleday. "What I love about Lee," he says, "is that she pulls no punches. That's what you want in an editor." That bedrock of trust was critical when Rash began drafting *In the Valley*. He had been nagged for years by the feeling that several of the characters in *Serena* had more to tell him, but he had no desire to write a

the unearthly realm of biblical metaphor. With that small flourish, all the elements clicked into place. "Ron's got the willingness to sound those deep bass notes," Boudreaux says, "and play those chords that unsettle you in your bones."

Does a swell of praise change a person's life? Of course it does, in some ways. Rash gets more requests for readings and interviews, and he's learned how to write in hotel rooms while on book tours. More exciting: He can now travel abroad. In France, Ireland, Australia, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, he's found enthusiastic readers who have never visited Appalachia but see themselves and their families in his work. He is humbled by and grateful for that, having spent so many years searching for that universal current. "He will never take any of it for granted," Steve Yarbrough says. "He wouldn't even know how."

Almost everything else has stayed the same: the morning workouts, the reading, the unsweetened tea. The long walks in the woods, scanning for snakes. Now at work on his twenty-third book, another novel, Rash plans to keep it that way. He's spent too much of his life leaning over yellow legal pads, batting away distractions, to worry about the demands of literary fame. He'd rather keep reading, keep writing, keep sweating it out every day. Better to focus on the page in front of him, on chasing transcendence over the horizon. 

Home Trend Report: Southern Contemporary

THREE DESIGN EXPERTS WEIGH IN
WITH THEIR LATEST PICKS

Design trends change with the seasons, and when it comes to updating your space, there's perhaps no time like the present. As we spend more time than ever in our homes, many are itching for a refresh, be it a slight rearrangement, a new coat of paint, or an accent piece that creates an entirely new feel. In the spirit of change, we looked to a few of our favorite designers and suppliers for the pulse on current market trends. The takeaway? Thoughtful additions with contemporary leanings can transform a room, while a modern accent or two can go a long way.



**Robert
Scheffy**

OWNER, SCHEFFY
CONSTRUCTION

Start by working from the ground up. Both indoors and out, architectural-grade concrete pavers make for a chic, timeless look. Unique pavers are available in a variety of colors, shapes, and patterns, channeling classic style with striking versatility. "Peacock Pavers products help us achieve the effortless style we're known for," Scheffy says. "They blend new with old and make it easy to transition from indoor spaces to outdoor living—something more and more of our clients want."

PeacockPavers.com



**Tray
Petty**

VICE PRESIDENT,
MOORE & GILES

A bold leather piece can anchor any space, a design principle leather maker Moore & Giles has prided itself on for decades. Designed with longevity in mind, the brand's iconic Percival chair is customizable in sixteen rich hues. "Our goal was to highlight the combination of natural wood and natural leather and in an occasional chair that wasn't too stuffy," notes Petty, design lead on the chair, crafted in Hickory, North Carolina. "We offer it in a wide selection of our signature Moore & Giles leathers. My favorite is the Mont Blanco Winter Pine."

MooreandGiles.com



**Bew
White III**

CEO,
SUMMER CLASSICS

Sleek and understated, Lucite accents pair well with any color palette. "The King bar stool by our sister brand Gabby is a perfect way to modernize any kitchen or bar area," White says. "With a clear acrylic seat and a sturdy metal base, the piece creates an eye-catching yet streamlined look." White advises clients to think ahead when considering new furnishings. "The home is a vessel for creating life's best moments, and when furniture is both fashionable and timeless, it can become a purchase for generations." The sentiment rings true; with every modern update, the South's inherent style endures.

SummerClassicsHome.com



Peacock Pavers paving (prices vary); Moore & Giles Percival side chairs (\$3,200 each); King bar stools by Gabby, sister brand to Summer Classics (\$584 each).

DUE SOUTH

TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE FOR THE SOUTHERN SOUL



SHOPS

Where the Wild Things Grow

THESE SEVEN STANDOUT NURSERIES HELP SOUTHERN GARDENERS PLANT A PARADISE AT HOME

By CJ Lotz

Sun-loving native plants bloom at Roots and Shoots in Charleston, South Carolina.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JACQUELINE STOFFICK

GARDEN&GUN AUG. / SEP. 2020 103



As summer tapers into fall, gardeners know it's time to plan and plant again, and the South's bountiful nurseries stand ready to help. While most of these seven exceptional shops will ship a pot of their heirloom roses or tea camellias, a visit in person can mean wandering among fall-blooming azaleas, discovering a native plant that butterflies love, or saying hello to a blossom-eating tortoise. And you'll probably pick up some green-thumbed wisdom, too. "Putting roots in the ground when it cools down gives a plant the chance to get established,

to develop before new growth," says Jason Powell of Petals from the Past, in Jemison, Alabama. "The life lessons we need are right here in our gardens."

The Antique Rose Emporium

BRENNHAM, TEXAS

A dozen stick-straight red blooms in a grocery store fridge are a recent footnote in the winding saga of roses. "True landscape plants, garden roses climb or cascade and have various leaf forms and are not bred for the flower alone," says Mike Shoup, who tends to eight acres of gardens at his Antique Rose Emporium. Some of the roses are newly developed, but many are rescued Southern heirlooms. The Maggie rose, for example, collected in Louisiana, blossoms deep pink, darkens to crimson in cool air, and sends out a robust perfume. "There's an emotional response," Shoup says. "Memories come back when you smell a rose in a garden." He takes orders all year and begins shipping in September, when nights start to cool and "the roses jump because they're happy."

PLANT PICK: Shoup recently introduced the *Belinda's Blush* rose, a creamy pink offshoot of the best-selling and easy-to-grow *Belinda's Dream*, both mostly thorn-free.

Bedford Greenhouses

AUGUSTA, GEORGIA

As a young couple shuffling among corporate jobs in Atlanta and Raleigh, Milledge and Joanne Peterson found stability in planting a garden, a way to make temporary digs feel rooted. Then in 2002, on a visit to see their families in Augusta, they heard that Bedford Greenhouses, a local institution since the 1940s, was for sale. It seemed like serendipity—at first. "We took over the greenhouse during what might

have been the hottest summer on record," Joanne says. "But the longtime employees helped us every step of the way." Those include Raymond Shorts and Rene Wells, who have worked at the nursery since the 1970s. Bedford does a brisk trade in azaleas—the star sights at nearby Augusta National Golf Club—and especially Encore azaleas, which bloom in spring and again in fall. And while customers often ask about flowers that can handle heat (the Petersons suggest scorch-tolerant Sunpatiens), at the shaded terrarium "bar," guests build indoor capsule gardens that thrive no matter the season.

PLANT PICK: *Dragon Wing* begonias, which can take full sun. "But they are also easy to grow in partial shade," Joanne says, "and they have lush green leaves and red and pink flowers."

Camellia Forest Nursery

CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA

Off State Highway 54, David and Christine Parks raise hundreds of cold-hardy flowering camellia shrubs, many of which David's father developed, such as the Survivor, which withstood a nine-below-zero night in 1985 and can grow at the northern frontier of the camellia's range in the mid-South. Plant a row and take in the beauty of the winter flowers, or drink in the beauty of camellias literally: The leaves of *Camellia sinensis*, a close relative of the showy types, dry into black and green tea. Christine is the author of the new book *Grow Your Own Tea*, and the couple maintain a half acre of tea gardens that they open for workshops. "Even on a small plant, you can pick new shoots to help it branch out and make it

Clockwise from top left: Urban Roots in New Orleans; butterfly-attracting *Viburnum nudum* at Roots and Shoots; Ta Wanda Wright at Bedford Greenhouses in Augusta; Le Conte pears ripen at Florida's Just Fruits and Exotics; Bedford co-owners Milledge and Joanne Peterson; poppies and Spanish lavender at Petals from the Past in Alabama.





Clockwise from top left: PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUSH JAGOE; JACQUELINE STOPSICK; MARGARET HOUSTON (3, 5); GABRIEL HANWAY; GRAHAM YELTON

DUE SOUTH

stronger," David says. "We might gather a half pound of tea from a single plant, and you can taste the difference between a spring and summer harvest."

PLANT PICK: *Dave's Fave or Christine's Choice tea camellias that the couple bred. "They're prolific bloomers with a small white flower in the fall," David says. "And they attract a lot of bees."*

Just Fruits and Exotics

WAKULLA COUNTY, FLORIDA

When horticulturist Jenks Farmer, one of the South's leading authorities on rare and edible plants, is in need of a fig, paw-paw, mayhaw, or kumquat tree, he calls Just Fruits and Exotics, near Apalachicola National Forest. "You can't just crank trees out on an assembly line," says co-owner Jamake Robinson, who took over the old-school Gulf Coast nursery and orchard in 2017 with his business partner Michael Davino. The pair nurtures hundreds of varieties of rare fruit trees, including three dozen persimmon cultivars, collecting cuttings from backyards and abandoned orchards and tending saplings for years before sending them out into the world. "A tree settling into the fall soil," Robinson says, "is a tree getting used to its new home."

PLANT PICK: *The LSU Improved Celeste, which Robinson calls a "beginner's fig," or the yellow Smith, "a rare fig that collectors seek," Davino says.*

Petals from the Past

JEMISON, ALABAMA

The twenty-two acres of display gardens at Petals from the Past fan out with intention. The whole place is set up as a living learning center, showing by blooming example how plants and pollinators work together to complete nature's flower-to-fruit cycle. Beyond the old farmhouse that serves as a gift shop, walk by milkweed on your way to the blueberries, salvia on the way to native muscadine grapes, and purple anise hyssop blooming near the blackberries. Owners Jason Powell and his wife, Shelley, both horticulturists who studied at Texas A&M, opened the garden center in 1994, and today it's a Deep South destination for rare,



Shelly the tortoise snacks on a hibiscus flower at Urban Roots; mason bee hotels at Roots and Shoots.



heirloom, and native plants. The couple has noticed longtime regulars and younger generations alike moving away from manicured lawns and pristine landscaping. "It used to be that people just wanted their gardens to look beautiful," Jason says. "But now people are looking for something that's better for the earth. We're asking of our gardens the same things we're asking of ourselves."

PLANT PICK: *The cucumber tree, a type of magnolia. "It's sometimes called a 'bigleaf magnolia,' as it has phenomenally large leaves," Jason says. "It's almost prehistoric looking, like we're going to see dinosaurs walking by, and it has a big, beautiful open white flower."*

Roots and Shoots

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

If you're not ready to plant a full-on native wildscape, consider a pollinator "pocket," a patch of ground that supports the birds and the bees and the butterflies, advises Roots and Shoots owner David Manger. Last November, Manger went from supplementing his landscape work by growing and selling a couple of rows of milkweed and lilies in his backyard to opening an entire nursery of native plants, where hand-painted signs point out the shade seekers and sun lovers. Find Georgia aster, goldenrod, and coral honeysuckle, a magnet for ruby-throated hummingbirds, and ask Manger or nursery co-manager Rachel Carey to show you the hand-built wood-and-straw "hotels" that shelter mason bees.

PLANT PICK: *Native red salvia. "It's super bloomy and grows until it freezes," Manger says. "And it's a treat for butterflies."*

Urban Roots Garden Center

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

If Noah had also been a plant geek, his floating zoo might have looked something like Urban Roots, where goats, turtles, rabbits, and Jackson the miniature pig all shelter from the swelter of New Orleans among giant ferns and elephant-ear plants. "We have a tortoise, Shelly, who loves the prickly pear cactus fruit," says Tom Wolfe, who co-owns the business with Matt Frost. The gardening oasis hosts an annual cactus sale in late summer, when heat peaks and most of the flowers are fried. All year long, find compact courtyard winners such as ponytail palms set among the center's collection of salvaged cast-iron gates. Inside the shop, regulars know to greet Elvis the prairie dog. "Do say hi," Wolfe says. "He barks back."

PLANT PICK: *"Thirty years ago, everyone here in the Irish Channel neighborhood had a gloriosa lily on their fence," Wolfe says, "and then it fell by the wayside until one of our local growers started growing it again." In one season, the yellow-and-red stunners will cover a fence with flowers—and an entire block with fragrance. ☐*

FIELD SHOP

BY GARDEN & GUN

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Marble striped tray by Be Home (\$90); mixing glass by Terrane Glass (\$110); long swizzle spoon by Corbell Silver (\$42); Pappy Bourbon Nib Brittle by Pappy & Company and Olive and Sinclair (\$26); silver-plated jigger by Corbell Silver (\$48); julep cup by Salisbury (\$55); julep straw (\$4); julep strainer by ME Speak Design (\$155); carafe decanter by Nate Cotterman (\$170); ribbed julep cup by Corbell Silver (\$50); botanical napkin set by Lettermade (\$48); brass dish by ME Speak Design (\$85); pecans by Schermer Pecans (\$20.50); the Elizabeth Derby hat by Louise Green (\$425).

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LODGE

Luxury Ducks, Texas-Style

A NEW LODGE ON A SPRAWLING RANCH IS EQUAL PARTS WATERFOWLER'S HAVEN AND SUMPTUOUS RETREAT

By T. Edward Nickens

Teal are the most dishonest of ducks. They don't circle your decoys in great looping gyres, as ducks are supposed to do, giving you a chance to steel your spirit and ready the gun. They don't talk back to your quacks or drift into the decoys with wings set and feet splayed. Instead, they swarm over the horizon like giant clouds of bees and strafe the decoys from any direction they please.

Which is why, as I'm hunkered down in a Texas Coastal Plains duck blind, at the sight of another teal swarm on the horizon, my heart hammers.

"You see them, right?" I ask one of my blind mates. "They're coming. You see them coming?"

He doesn't have time to answer, because here they are, just that fast, fifteen teal banking over the back of the blind and three guns up and nine shells spent and maybe a trio of ducks on the water.

No. Make that two.

"Holy cow, man," I groan. "How can such a little bird give us such a big beatdown?"

My blind mate has no answer, but I can take solace in this: If I'm going to take a duck spanking, I'm happy to volunteer here, at one of the most elegant duck lodges I've ever visited.

Located about a ninety-minute drive southwest of Houston, Spread Oaks Ranch sprawls across a 5,500-acre mosaic of cattle lands; fields of organic rice, soybeans, and corn; and wetlands. Live oaks cluster in picturesque mottes on the prairie. Rare coastal prairie grasslands lie cloaked in Indian grass and blue-stem. Five miles of the Colorado River form part of the ranch's eastern border, while the year-round flow of Blue Creek feeds its wetlands and ponds.

Such a bounty of water in Texas draws waves of migrating waterfowl ready to put down winter roots in the southernmost reaches of the Central Flyway. Migrations of teal, pintail, and mallard are a draw here, but the property is also centered in the Texas range of mottled ducks, a true trophy for waterfowlers. Hunting sandhill cranes is another popular option, and Spread Oaks also offers alligator, hog, dove, and deer hunts.

Taking advantage of that bounty requires that you leave the lodge proper, however, and that's no easy task.

We arrived on a sunny midafternoon in January, in



Clockwise from top:
The lodge's great
room; a morning in
the blind; a salad of
romanesco, dinosaur
kale, and a ranch egg.

short-sleeves weather and with time to explore the lodge and its associated casitas. Groups at Spread Oaks Ranch are typically scheduled on a buyout basis, so we had the place to ourselves. In the entrance courtyard, a stone fountain from a French town square bubbles. Inside the soaring fifteen-thousand-square-foot cream stone lodge, hand-carved sculptures, hair-on-hide bar stools, and acres of leather sofas and chairs beckon. Outside, an infinity pool gives way to a verdant lawn and a five-acre lake. We were pulling bass from the water within minutes of stringing rods.

This welcoming mix of country retreat and get-after-it sporting options flows naturally from the ranch's owner. Forrest Wylie grew up in the hardscrabble Coastal Plains, where his father was an itinerant oil field worker. That gave the young Wylie plenty of unrestricted time. "We'd hunt and fish tennis-shoe-style," he says with a laugh, drink in hand, his tall frame relaxed in a Mexican *equipale* chair. That meant sneaking onto ranch ponds to shoot wood ducks, with pals stringing the birds

through the belt loops of their blue jeans, always ready for a quick escape.

Wylie's own efforts in Texas oil fields were fruitful, and he built a broad portfolio of energy and investment businesses. That's given him the blessing of turning back to the landscapes that fashioned his childhood. "I wanted a place where I had access to the things that mattered to me as a kid," he says, "and central to the equation were open lands, and working lands, and tons of wildlife." He bought the first parcel of what would be Spread Oaks Ranch in 2012, then added two more adjoining properties, opening the ranch to guests for its first full season last year. And throughout, Wylie has brought a conservation-based approach to the landscape. All but a small portion of the ranch's more than eight square miles are deeded in a conservation easement. "So much of Texas land management is one-dimensional," he laments. "It's just about timber. Or just about agriculture or just about cattle. There's not enough balance, and that's what I wanted to create here. Taking care of the land and

all that involves—the wildlife, the water, the forests, all of it."

Others on the Spread Oaks Ranch team ensure that its vibe stays thoroughly Texan. Ranch manager Tim Soderquist spent years as a regional director for Ducks Unlimited, building on his teenage years guiding duck and goose hunters on the Katy and Eagle Lake prairies some twenty miles north of Spread Oaks. Meanwhile, chef Ric Rosser is another Texas native and can wax equally poetic about heirloom okra and traditional cured hams. He's set up extensive gardens and a custom-built smokehouse. "If you ask me what we're cooking," he says, grinning, "my answer is: whatever we're growing."

Unfortunately, none of the pampering, the poolside drinks, the authentic chuckwagon cocktail dinners, or the private casitas with their miles-deep mattresses make it easy to get out of bed before dawn, nor swing nimbly on a teal coming from behind with a few dozen other birds splitting the air. But if you're going to get schooled by ducks, this is the place. ☐

Elevate Above The Noise

SWITZERLAND INN
A Blue Ridge Parkway Resort

GARDEN & GUN Field Report

A RESOURCE FOR THE BEST EVENTS,
EXCURSIONS, AND PROMOTIONS

SIGNATURE EVENTS

Mark your calendar for these upcoming *Garden & Gun* experiences



Palmetto Bluff: Artist in Residence

Fall 2020 • Bluffton, South Carolina

A collaboration between *Garden & Gun* and Palmetto Bluff, the Artist in Residence series offers hands-on workshops with some of the South's most treasured makers, innovators, and artists. Throughout the fall and beyond, join winemaker Emily Pelton of Veritas Vineyard and Winery, James Beard Award-winning chef Vishwesh Bhatt of Oxford, Mississippi's Snackbar, and others for unforgettable experiences at the Artist Cottage.



Cast & Blast

September 11-13 • Lake Charles, Louisiana

G&G invites readers to Lake Charles for an unrivaled sporting experience during opening weekend of teal season. Hosted at Grosse Savanne Lodge in the heart of the Louisiana marshland, this weekend event offers a chance to hunt the first morning of the season, catch prize redfish, and revel in a true sportsman's paradise. When evening comes, return to the lodge for cocktails and a special meal to commemorate a successful day in the field.



Eco-Adventure in Bermuda

October 9-12 • Bermuda

In partnership with Bermuda Tourism Authority, G&G travels to Bermuda for a one-of-a-kind weekend exploring the island's natural beauty through the lens of conservation. Join local experts and G&G editors to take in pristine coral reefs, explore peaceful wetlands and verdant jungles, bike through lush nature trails, and more, all paired with an abundance of fresh, seasonal cuisine and fine accommodations at the beachfront Rosewood Bermuda.



G&G Shoot-Out at Sweetens Cove Golf Club

October 31 • South Pittsburg, Tennessee

Garden & Gun's first-ever golf tournament takes place at Sweetens Cove Golf Club, an iconic Southern course known as the Field of Dreams. Following two nine-hole rounds, the unique fall tournament concludes with a celebratory Bourbon Bash, an evening at the club with live music, barbecue, and signature cocktails featuring the newly debuted Sweetens Cove Tennessee Bourbon.



Annual G&G Shoot

November 7 • Greensboro, Georgia

Gather at Reynolds Lake Oconee's beautiful Sandy Creek Sporting Grounds for the eighth-annual G&G Shoot. Guests can take part in a morning sporting clays tournament, later proceeding to an afternoon reception where lunch, live music, and an awards ceremony await. Luxury accommodations for Annual Shoot guests are available through The Ritz-Carlton Reynolds, Lake Oconee.

FIELD REPORT DESTINATIONS

A guide to adventures in the South and beyond



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G&G PARTNER EVENTS

SEPTEMBER 4

A STITZEL-WELLER AFFAIR

Louisville, Kentucky

Blade and Bow Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey hosts this annual celebration. Savor a menu by Garden & Gun Club chef Ann Kim and fine bourbon pairings at the famed Stitzel-Weller Distillery during its eighty-fifth year.

SEPTEMBER 24-25

THE CONFERENCE ON THE FRONT PORCH

Taylor, Mississippi

This two-day gathering celebrates the Southern front porch with speakers, live music, home tours, and more. This year's lineup includes writer Roy Blount Jr., photographer Maude Schuyler Clay, and musician Watermelon Slim.

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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2020

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G&G FIELD REPORT

The Southern Agenda

GOINGS-ON IN THE SOUTH & BEYOND

★
Seasonal
Sips and Bites
to Chew On

SEAFOOD

Dip Deep into Lobster Season

FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

"I consider myself an underwater hunter," says Jim "Chiefy" Mathie, a recreational diver in Broward County and the author of *Catching the Bug: The Comprehensive Guide to Catching the Spiny Lobster*. For thirty-five years now, and as often as he can during Florida's lobster season, which begins August 6, Mathie dives among the reefs near Fort Lauderdale for spiny lobster. Sure, charter snorkel trips and free diving—with the right gear and a license—might also land you bugs, but Mathie prefers to scuba dive to the deeper parts of the reefs to coax out the antennae nocturnal

creatures. "Reach in with your tickle stick," he says, "tapping very gently on the tail to move them out of their hole, and then catch them in the net." Last season, Mathie found clusters of lobsters that were just barely too small (keeping a lobster with a carapace shorter than three inches is illegal), and he let them swim free to keep growing. "I think that says we'll have a good season this year." Back on the boat, he runs through his meal plan like a lobster-loving Bubba Blue: roasted lobster, grilled lobster, sautéed lobster, lobster stuffed with crab... Seek out some crustaceans yourself in late

summer, when any seafood spot worth its salt in South Florida will serve the tender meat with an ample supply of garlic butter. ■ myfwc.com

LEGUME

Alabama

BUTTER BEAN DREAMS

The butter beans that the restaurateur Pardis Stitt harvests on her family farm outside of Birmingham this time of year are sweet treasures to her. "They are just like celadon jewels," says Stitt, who with her husband, the chef Frank Stitt, helms the B'ham institutions Highlands Bar & Grill, Bottega, and Chez Fonfon. The oldest daughter of Iranian American parents, Pardis grew up in Birmingham with Southern and Persian flavors on the table. "My mom would make a Persian rice and beans dish, baghali polo, with fava beans, and now my family always makes it with butter beans and basmati rice." The process: In separate pots, cook butter beans (most of the rest of the country calls these flavorful legumes lima beans) and rice with clarified butter and olive oil, and then combine the beans and rice and add salt, saffron, and fresh dill. "You must add so much dill that you'll have dill in your teeth," she says. "And in my family, the prize is the *tahdig*, the layer of buttery and crispy sticky rice at the bottom of the pot."

■ stittrestaurantgroup.com

FRUIT

Arkansas

HEIRLOOM FIESTA

Chef Rafael Rios knows his tomatoes by name: There's the Arkansas Traveler, big and beefy and slightly acidic, and two of Rios's personal favorites, the Brandywine and the Cherokee Purple, sweet varieties that can weigh in at two pounds apiece. "When you eat a tomato grown the way it's supposed to—outside, with the sun and rain, letting nature do its thing—you taste the difference," says Rios, a James Beard Award semifinalist this year. He runs three iterations of Yeyo's (a taco truck, a food hall

stall, and a mezcaleria) in Northwest Arkansas, and at his family's farm, he grows fifteen tomato varieties and is developing his own hybrids. Rios eats tomatoes straight off the vine, sprinkled with salt, and serves pico de gallo at his restaurants. "How to make pico de gallo is no secret," he explains: lime squeezed over serrano peppers, coriander seeds, spring onions, and a tomato base. But using perfectly juicy heirlooms, as Rios does, will make that fresh pico something to crow about.

■ yeyosnwa.com



LEGUME

Georgia

GOBS OF GOOBERS

A boiled peanut isn't just any peanut thrown in hot water. "Make sure you've got yourself a green peanut," says Alex Hardy of Hardy Farms Peanuts, which has been selling green and boiled peanuts at roadside stands throughout Georgia for three decades. Unlike dried peanuts, which go into tinned snacks and peanut butter, a green peanut is newly dug from the field, and has a high water content and a short shelf life. "Green peanuts are harvested fresh, boiled fresh, and served fresh," Hardy says. Stewed in salty water, maybe with spices, the peanuts soften and take on a texture akin to that of their cooked legume relatives. As any Southern road-tripper knows, pots of boiled peanuts linger at gas stations year-round, but those are usually frozen, canned, or dried and then soaked. When handmade signs and humble stands pop up along country roads in August, September, and October, pull over knowing the getting's good and green.

■ hardyfarmspanuts.com

DRINK

Kentucky

BET ON A CLASSIC

"There should be thirty-six sips in a mint julep," says Chris Morris, the master distiller at Woodford Reserve, the official bourbon of the Kentucky Derby. Precise, yes, but Morris would know—he's been mixing the drink at Churchill Downs on Derby Day for two decades, and even on live television. It's a minute-long process before the two-minute race: Rub one or two mint leaves around a julep cup and drop them in the bottom along with a glug of powdered-sugar simple syrup; pour in two ounces of bourbon and nearly fill the cup with crushed ice; tuck a mint sprig next to the sipping straw. "This would have been my twenty-first year making juleps at the Derby," Morris says. The coronavirus pandemic stopped just about everything in its tracks—from the horses to the two tons of fresh mint picked and packed in May. "Mint grows whether you're going to use it or not," points out Morris, and so a fresh supply will be ready at the gates for the new Derby date, September 5.

■ kentuckyderby.com

SEAFOOD

Louisiana

TOTAL SOFTIES

As often as once a week over the course of their short lives, shrimp get naked and wiggle in the moonlight. For the few hours at night when white Gulf shrimp shed their tough skin and grow into a new size, they're called soft-shell shrimp. "They look just like shrimp, but like they're tired or something," says Lance Nacio, a shrimp-er in Terrebonne Parish, about an hour south of New Orleans. "They're limp." But they're also incredibly juicy—the whole time they're bare, shrimp absorb water and become tiny flavor capsules of their Gulf and bayou homes. The chef Melissa Martin at Mosquito Supper Club in New Orleans dries soft-shell shrimp with paper towels and fries them for po'boys. "My family in the shrimp industry call me when they've got a bunch of soft-shells in their catch, and



I go pick them out," Martin says. "They are really delicate—and I realize not everyone has that kind of access in their life." To get your hands on some, you'll need to make friends with shrimpers such as Nacio, who has a freezer on board his *Anna Marie* and sells and ships bags of frozen softies as summer turns to fall and the shrimp really start to get jiggly.

■ annamarieshrimp.com

DRINK

Maryland

SQUEEZE PLAY

Mimosas and screwdrivers may have their permanent spots reserved at brunch and football tailgates, but in Maryland, the Orange Crush wears the citrus cocktail crown. In 1995, the owners of Harborside Bar & Grill in Ocean City created the drink when they poured vodka, orange juice, triple sec, and Sierra Mist over ice cubes. The waterfront bar has sold millions of Crushes since, squeezing oranges in an industrial juice press with every order, and watching other Old Line State bars catch on. Ryleigh's Oyster, for instance, a beloved Baltimore seafood spot, sells thousands of its version in the summer months. "A lot of people try to make it easier by pressing the orange ahead of time," says owner Brian McComas. "But the key is always the freshness of the juice." Ryleigh's has experimented with grapefruit, blueberry, watermelon, and lemon versions, and even subbed in local Sagamore whiskey for the vodka. Still, the classic reigns. "The drink has just ingrained itself," McComas says. "It's become Maryland's cocktail."

■ weocharborside.com

■ ryleighs.com

SEAFOOD

Mississippi

A WRITER'S BIG BREAK

Read any of Eudora Welty's stories and two traits become clear: She had a great love for people, and she had a dazzling sense of fun. Welty regularly invited friends to her home at 1119 Pinehurst Street in Jackson, where night-blooming flowers burst into fragrance, and friends discussed books, played games, and dipped into her plentiful stock of Maker's Mark. One evening in 1985, Welty hosted the esteemed broadcast journalist Roger Mudd and made a crab casserole (Mississippi's blue crab season stretches into late fall). As she removed the Pyrex dish from the oven, it slipped and the contents spilled across the floor. Undeterred, the friends ate crackers and beans and drank bourbon into the night. Two weeks later, Mudd received a postcard from Welty, which now resides with his papers at Washington & Lee University in Virginia. The front depicts the Cheshire cat; on the back, Welty scrawled her recipe for Eudora's Crab Dish. Ingredients: Crabmeat, green pepper, onion, celery, mayonnaise, and spices. Preparation: "Remove from oven, immediately invert and allow to reach kitchen floor. Test and see if thoroughly shattered. If Roger Mudd is dinner guest, he will quickly appear and take care of everything. Serves 0."

■ eudorawelty.org

FRUIT

North Carolina

GRAPE FOR YOU

"Mama always told you to eat your fruits and veggies," says Patricia Gallagher, a researcher at Wake Forest School of Medicine, "even if she didn't know why." As usual, Mama was right, especially when it comes to muscadines. In 2015, the Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center received the largest gift in its history, a \$20 million anonymous donation to research the benefits of these hardy native Southern grapes, which contain antioxidant-packed compounds called dietary polyphenols. After five years of study, researchers found



Songs to Savor

Chef Bryant Terry, author of the Vegetable Kingdom cookbook, comes from a musical family in Memphis and shares a playlist for good times in the kitchen and beyond.

"Take Me to the River"

Al Green

"That classic Memphis sound gets everyone moving."

"I Can't Stand the Rain"

Ann Peebles

"She's my aunt, so our whole family felt like we won because it was such a big hit."

"Your Love Is to Blame"

Don Bryant

"The latest song by my uncle Don, who was house songwriter for Hi Records in the 1960s and 1970s. It has been inspiring seeing him make a comeback in his late seventies."

"Respect Yourself"

The Staples Singers

"This reminds me of conversations about life I used to have with my paternal grandfather in his backyard garden while I was harvesting vegetables, shelling peas, or shucking corn."

"Sixty Minute Man"

Rufus Thomas

"He starts the song with the type of chanting one might hear in parts of sub-Saharan Africa or the antebellum South. And the call and response with the backup singers sounds straight out of New Orleans."

"Melting Pot"

Booker T. & the M.G.'s

"This song is so funky. Whenever I hear it, I want to do a James Brown split."

that a concentrated muscadine extract can improve hypertension-induced heart and vessel damage, and in a clinical trial, it reduced fatigue and improved physical function in patients with advanced cancer. But there's a catch for those eaters who like only the flavorful gooey centers: The benefits are in muscadine skins and seeds. At least one winemaker in North Carolina understands: WoodMill Winery in Vale incorporates grape skins into the fermentation process. And for bakers, when muscadines ripen in late summer and start popping up at farmers' markets, making a whole-fruit grape hull pie is now doctor approved.

■ ncmuscadinegrape.org



GRAIN

Oklahoma

EARS TO THE GROUND

"We think that we are selecting, in control," says Bill McDorman, the executive director of the Rocky Mountain Seed Alliance. "But corn is a mysterious plant." He's describing Glass Gem corn, with its jewel-like kernels of indigo, chartreuse, gold, and crimson. The rainbow effect results from the years an Oklahoma man named Carl Barnes spent crossbreeding Native American corns, including Pawnee miniature corn and Osage Greyhorse. "It was a spiritual endeavor," McDorman says. "He let the corns dance together." After Barnes died, in 2016, the alliance and others such as Native Seeds/SEARCH have continued his legacy by sharing the seeds with history-loving gardeners. Ground Glass Gem makes delicious cornbread, but it's almost too pretty to eat.

■ rockymountainseeds.org

■ nativeseeds.org

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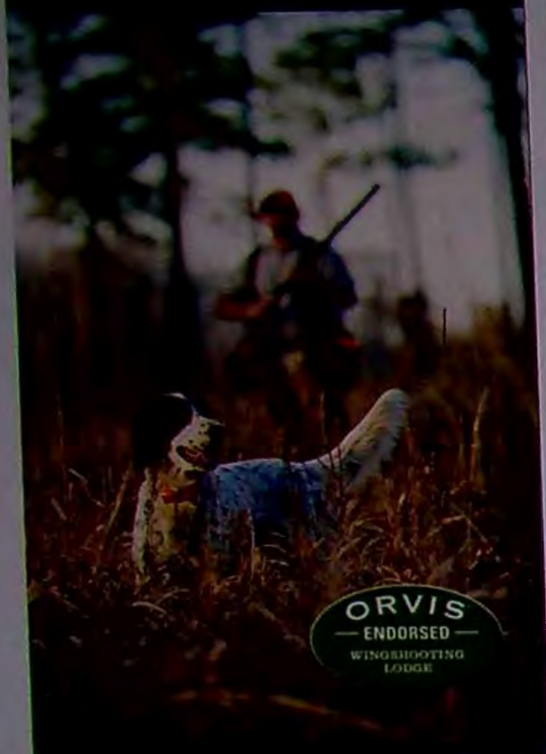
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SOUTHERN AGENDA

FRUIT

South Carolina

SWEET RESURRECTION

So prized for its sweet fruit and tender rind was the Bradford watermelon that farmers in the 1800s laced part of their crop with poison to deter thieves. "The watermelon has a curious, symbolic hold on people, and it inspires an extraordinary sense of property," says David S. Shields, a culinary historian at the University of South Carolina. The Bradford seemed to disappear after the 1920s, when other melons' shipping hardiness outranked flavor in importance. In 2006, Shields began a yearslong search for the melon; eventually he decided it was extinct, and even wrote an obituary for it. "I lamented that we would never again taste it," Shields says. When farmer Nat Bradford read the article, he sent Shields a picture of his white-seeded watermelons; the family had never stopped growing them in Sumter. Since then, the Bradford, which ripens in August, has rebounded in Southern kitchens. Shields receives a yearly watermelon, courtesy of the family; you can reserve yours online.

■ bradfordwatermelons.com

GAME

Tennessee

FORGET LOW AND SLOW

"You've gone all these months, you're wanting to scratch that itch, you're wanting to get out in the field," pitmaster Pat Martin says, "and then, almost like that first college football game—dove season." On September 1, opening day, the owner of Martin's Bar-B-Que Joint will perch on a five-gallon bucket somewhere near Centerville, Tennessee, hunting birds. But come supper, you'll find him at a grill, not a pit. "Barbecuing dove? I would not do it. Like other wild game, it's tricky and it's lean, but it's not complicated." After cleaning his birds, brining them for up to eight hours, and letting them dry in the fridge and then come to room temperature, Martin gets a Japanese yakitori grill going (he says a trusty Weber could also

work—you're looking for "the hot side of medium" heat). He blends a sauce of cane syrup, white or rice vinegar, and something sweet and in season, pureed—peaches, tomatoes, or blackberries. "The sauce is going to run, but that's okay," he says. "Let the birds sit on the heat for one minute, constantly basting that flavor on there, and then flip it, and it won't take you but two minutes to cook dove."

■ martinsbbqjoint.com

DRINK

Texas

BABY, WRITE THIS DOWN



George Strait wasn't always a tequila drinker. But the legendary Texas country singer—who boasts more number-one hits than any artist in history—is a guy who knows when to change his tune. When a few of his buddies in Mexico shared a family stash of the spirit, Strait became a believer, and when they made the stuff commercially available under the brand Código 1530, Strait signed on as an investor. "Believe me, none of us were looking to start a tequila company," he says. The King of Country especially enjoys when the agave spirit hangs out in the cupholder of his golf cart. "There's a caddy down at El Dorado, one of my good friends, named Alberto Sanchez—everyone calls him Cuchara," he says. "He's a two-handicap golfer, way better than I'll ever be. And he can make a mean twist on the Paloma." At home, Strait makes an El Rey: an ounce and a half of reposado tequila, one ounce of fresh grapefruit juice, three-quarters of an ounce of lime juice, and six ounces of club soda on the rocks in a collins glass with a salted rim and a grapefruit peel. Strait likes it with nachos.

■ codigo1530.com

MEAT

Virginia

PEDIGREED PORK

In a footnote in David Chang's forthcoming memoir, *Eat a Peach*, the Virginia-raised chef known for his Momofuku restaurants (and his helpful quarantine Instagram videos) describes how some folks fell back in love with country ham: "Americans still only had eyes for Italian prosciutto when we first started serving paper-thin slices of smoked pork made in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia from purveyors like Benton's, Broadbent, Colonel Newsom's, and Edwards," Chang writes. Sam Edwards III makes it a point to visit Chang's restaurants and thank him for helping renew interest in his family's livelihood—and Edwards knows that many Southerners never stopped loving the stuff. "We are putting hams down heavy in anticipation of the holidays," says Edwards, who takes orders year-round but sees his biggest rush in fall and winter. "It takes a regular country ham four to five months to age." And in the heat of summer, while he waits for some of the world's tastiest hocks to cure, he makes himself a sandwich: white bread, Duke's mayo, vine-ripened tomato, crisp lettuce, and his hickory-smoked peppered bacon.

■ edwardsvaham.com

SAUCE

Washington, D.C.

CAPITAL CONDIMENT

Found at Asian carryout spots throughout the city, a thin, red, sweet-and-spicy condiment called **mumbo sauce** is a D.C. insider secret. "When I was growing up in the eighties and nineties, we'd order wings 'saltpeppermumbo' like it was all one word," says Doretea Burton. She passed along the love of her hometown's sauce to her sons Andy and Nyles, the founders of Andy Factory, which bottles and ships mumbo sauce. (Not to be confused with a Chicago company's trademarked "Mumbo," which is why D.C. variations are often spelled "mambo," but still usually pronounced with a *u*.) Residents pour it over chicken, french fries, and even salmon and

meat loaf. Local hip-hop artists and go-go bands, who play the city's native funk music, pay homage, such as when the Grammy-nominated Christylez Bacon wrote an entire song dedicated to it. "Very few things are unique to D.C. because it's such a transient city," Burton says. "It's completely different than when I was growing up. The only things that remain are go-go music and mumbo sauce."

■ andyfactory.com



FRUIT

West Virginia

GOLD IN THE HILLS

Some call them hillbilly mangoes; some call them bandangos or West Virginia bananas. "The pawpaw is what you'd get if a banana, a mango, and a pineapple all got together and had a baby," says chef William Dissen, a West Virginian who worked at the Greenbrier resort before opening three restaurants in North Carolina, including Market Place in Asheville. The soft, tropical-tasting fruit grows wild in the mountains, especially in West Virginia, and when Dissen wants pawpaws during their late summer season, he calls on his network of foragers or takes to the woods himself. "Many a time I've blissed out on a trail eating pawpaws," he says. If he can wait, he'll make pawpaw preserves with lemon juice, clove, vanilla, and ginger, and then fill Appalachian-style hand pies. For the finishing touch, he sprinkles each pie with coarse cane sugar. In Dissen's experience, "they usually don't last long enough to cool."

■ marketplace-restaurant.com

—Lindsey Liles, CJ Lotz, Caroline Sanders, and Dacey Orr Sivewright



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BY ROY BLOUNT JR.

Smells Fishy

GETTING TO THE MEAT OF SALMON CROQUETTES—AND FAULKNER

In these screwier-than-usual times, where can we turn for comfort? To retro food! Macaroni and cheese? Too obvious. There's probably a macaroni-and-cheese *institute* on every corner. What humble, reassuring staple of my youth is undercelebrated? Salmon croquettes!

Research. I learned two things I didn't know, and wish I didn't know now.

ONE: My sister, Susan, and I may be the only people on earth who have always regarded salmon croquettes as vertical. Our mother's salmon croquettes stood on the plate, like little pudgy brown traffic cones. Salmon patties were flat, sure. But doesn't the word *croquette*, so similar to *coquette* and *Rockette*, connote perkiness?

No. Etymologically, *croquette* just connotes crunch. And the standard croquette is horizontal. I have consulted—have pleaded with—friends who grew up in Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Virginia. Not one of them has ever thought of croquettes as (except morally) upright. Nor have I found any photograph or recipe that portrays croquettes as anything but round and flat. I feel like an alien, a freak.

TWO: William Faulkner's favorite dish was salmon croquettes. (From the recipe on the side of the can.) John T. Edge reported this in 2008, after a tour of the Faulkner home in Oxford, Mississippi. And in *Talking about William Faulkner: Interviews with Jimmy Faulkner and Others*

(1996), we read:

"Brother Will would go out and buy salmon, and he would make salmon croquettes. We would pour a lot of catsup over them and eat them until we were sick. They were great." "Brother Will" is what Jimmy called his uncle William, who once called Jimmy "the only person who likes me for who I am."

Well la-di-da. Our Nobel Prize-winning madman was just a down-home old boy at heart, was he? A plain-jes-folks supper eater, whose books reek with incest, bad blood, homicide by—

Irrelevant, you say? Take this on board: Brother Will and Jimmy may very well have been catsupping croquettes on what (according to Lawrence Wells's new memoir, *In Faulkner's Shadow*) the family called "the Absalom table." The same table, that is, on whose surface Faulkner finished what may be, and is certainly crazy enough to be, his masterpiece: *Absalom, Absalom!*

...homicide by rusty scythe, plantation conflagration, thousand-word sentences, dizzying chronological leaps, a mansion reeking of compounded infarcted festering ravaging dread bred in the sinews of the ruthless half-savage founder and his spawn and the architect who supervised the project while half-fearing he would be killed and eaten by his ruthless, near-savage client and his untouched-by-Western-civilization crew.

Absalom, Absalom! The only one he gave an exclamation point!

And great eating, on that table, was salmon croquettes? Not something more on the order of a gall-and-brimstone mélange, bear chops rare, tentacles *brouillés* avec orris root? Maybe he was inspired by the animal involved:

It won't be much longer now *he thought* and then there won't be anything left. Not honor not pride not spirit not soul not Ritz crackers to crumble and roll the red-orange fishflesh in, not even the cylinder of tin where the Northern cold-water fish leaps immemorially, torqued forever (is he avian fish or aqueous bird) and sleekly blue-silver even though when the time arises for taking flight up crystal falls his body is semen-swollen and other-hued: lurid red-and-green in desperate venereal birth-and-deathplace-seeking resolution: time now to tear meat or squeal.

Faulkner drank, you know. But who sobs up on salmon croquettes? When do salmon croquettes seem like just the thing on which to get to doing some serious drinking and eating?

What a great writer eats can never be as great as whatever is eating him. In *Absalom, Absalom!* a shoe is "something between the sole of the foot and the earth to distinguish it from the foot of a beast." Who knows how he saw a croquette.

Faulkner can't spoil salmon croquettes for me, because come to think of it, I never much liked them when I was growing up. Salmon itself, I like just fine, having learned up North that it comes fresh or smoked. And check out my Icelandic salmon-fishing story, under *gillie, girl*, in my book *Alpha-better Juice: Or, the Joy of Text*.

Here's what haunts me: Have I been telling nice people, all my life, things like, "I saw that little boy of yours in the Christmas pageant, perched on that stage as proud and pert as a salmon croquette"? Or "Your sister is a stand-up gal. So many people are just patties. She's a real croquette"? ☐

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